

How To Never Study Again



**Learn More
Study Less**

**101 Strategies To Improve Your
Grades Without Studying More
Aaron Richardson**

How To Never Study Again:
101 Strategies To Improve Your Grades
Without Studying More
By: Aaron Richardson

Author of:
17 Kick-Ass Study Strategies: Studying Made Easy,
Fast, And Fun
100 Study Secrets (Your Teachers Don't Want You To
Know About)
Master Your Memory: Study Less. Learn More.

Learn More at:
www.SmartStudentSecrets.com

Thanks to Kay who helped clean up the madness I tend to write. She made this book possible and dramatically more readable.

I also appreciate everyone taking the time to read this. If you enjoy it then please help spread the message by writing a review on Amazon. In exchange, feel free to share this book with your friends!

What This Book Is Not - Magic Or Common Sense

1. Intelligence Is (Almost) Irrelevant
2. Testable Hypotheses And The Scientific Method
3. Measure Results
4. Impossible Becomes Possible

Catching Up

5. Know What You Don't Know
6. Find Good Sources
7. Short Term Pushes
8. Don't Know It. Get It.
9. Missing Links

Course Selection

10. High Grade Classes
11. Low Testing Courses
12. Find Your Preferred Focus

Unlimited Focus

13. Take "Notes"
14. Limit Questions
15. Manage Daydreaming
16. Show Up!
17. No Distractions

Read The Syllabus

18. Grade Percentages

Setting Priorities

20. Class Prioritization
21. High Value Work
22. Limit "Ungraded Work"

23. Cyclical Focus

The Essentials

24. Do Essential Work!

25. Stay Consistent

26. Read Your Mistakes

27. Not Disorganized

28. Excessive Strengthens Knowledge

Taking The Free Points

29. Easy Assignments

30. Questions That Answer Themselves

31. Teacher Emphasis

32. Correction Bonuses

33. Follow Directions

Taking The Multiplier Points

34. Prime Time For Test Prep Assignments

35. Base Knowledge

36. Fun Points

Tricks For Even More Cheap Points

37. Inherent Flaws In The System

38. How Could You Forget It?

39. Last Second Checkup

Teacher Management

40. Good Teacher Relations Basics

41. The Office Time Advantage

42. The Extra Effort

Boundless Confidence

43. Work Fast

44. Distract Your Doubts

45. Tinker. Don't Engineer.

46. Fear Is Good

Good Practice

- [47. Edit Your Work](#)
- [48. Find A Second Editor](#)
- [49. Neatness Points](#)
- [50. Provide More Info Than You Need](#)
- [51. Get Second Opinions](#)
- [52. Write For The Wait-Basket](#)
- [53. Skip The Textbook](#)

[Test Strategies](#)

- [54. Everything Is A Test](#)
- [55. The Pieces Must Fit](#)
- [56. Know What You Know](#)
- [57. Don't Overthink It](#)
- [58. Imperfection Is Good](#)

[How To Remember Everything \(Enough\)](#)

- [59. Make It Worth Remembering](#)
- [60. Limit Repetition](#)
- [61. Have A Good Reason](#)
- [62. Know You Don't Have To](#)
- [63. Failure IS An Option](#)
- [64. Make It Pleasurable](#)
- [65. Make It Interesting](#)
- [66. Make It A Challenge](#)
- [67. Make It Meaningful](#)
- [68. Your Biggest Competition](#)
- [69. Find Your Hook](#)

[Understanding](#)

- [70. Oversimplify But Under-Believe](#)
- [71. Metaphors Work](#)
- [72. Fight Acceptance](#)
- [73. Bikeshedding](#)
- [74. Layers Of Understanding](#)

- [75. Layer Categorization](#)
- [76. Progression](#)
- [77. Pattern Recognition](#)
- [78. Deep Versus Superficial](#)

[Writing](#)

- [79. How To Write Something You Know
Nothing About](#)
- [80. Read More](#)
- [81. Style Over Substance](#)
- [82. Simplify Complex Language](#)

[Goals](#)

- [83. Specificity](#)
- [84. Not Now Isn't Never](#)
- [85. Deadlining](#)
- [86. A Primer On Tweaking Your Strategy](#)

[Lifestyle](#)

- [87. A Sure Fire Method For Failure](#)
- [88. Simple Schedules](#)
- [89. Live The Material](#)
- [90. Discuss It](#)
- [91. Energy Management](#)
- [92. Real Relaxation](#)
- [93. Give Yourself Excuses \(Sometimes\)](#)
- [94. Domain Dependence](#)
- [95. Learn From Emotions](#)
- [96. Never Cram](#)
- [97. Don't Need A Miracle](#)
- [98. People That Value Grades](#)
- [99. Embrace Your Passions](#)
- [100. Prepare To Relearn It](#)
- [101. Have A Purpose](#)

Conclusion

What This Book Is Not - Magic Or Common Sense

This book is not intended to be a magic formula where you can put in no effort and suddenly dominate in class. Anyone that's trying to sell you that formula is lying. All strategies to do well in school beyond cheating schemes, require effort. The goal of this book is to show you how you can put in less work and get better results than the average student. It's about efficiency instead of magic.

This book is also not intended for students looking for near perfect grades. I've written millions of words on the subject of studying better. I've written book after book on the subject. I've written more articles than I could count. Virtually all of that content was focused on how to get your grades near perfect without putting in as much effort as the usual student. If you're looking to get near perfect grades then get one of those other books instead.

This book may provide value for the student looking to get perfect grades but it was originally written for more practical students. In my experience, the strategies recommended will keep a student's average grade somewhere from a B to an A. Part of this comes down to a student's willingness to stick through with the details and a part of it comes down to

how prepared a student was when they start to try to apply the strategies.

Trying to apply only some of these strategies to get perfect grades is an exercise in futility. These strategies are a stark contrast to good practice when you're going for near perfect grades. When you're looking to get perfect grades, the details are absolutely essential. Understanding the subject is a little bit less important because you can make up for your lack of understanding with details.

When you're not looking for perfection you can relax a little on the details. That allows a strategy like this to come into play. It's an alternative that doesn't require studying to do well. That being said, getting a general understanding of a subject is still required. Part of what makes studying the details so effective is that it makes understanding come more automatically. When you're not buckling down with the details, understanding is a little bit more difficult.

With this book, you can learn the strategies required to never study again. I've applied these strategies personally and worked with hundreds of students on variations of this strategy. This means, quite literally, you never have to pick up material to study out of class. All your learning takes place during class time and assignments related to class. That doesn't mean it's the most efficient strategy.

It only makes **studying** unnecessary.

A more practical and efficient application of this strategy will dramatically reduce the amount of time you study. A willingness to study a little bit will improve your results with this strategy. (An abundance of studying using all these strategies would likely hurt your grades.)

Studying everyday is the most efficient way to study but if you're just looking to get good grades (and not near perfect grades) then, by using the strategies in this book, you can do nearly as well while only studying a couple times a week.

Studying is one method of improving your grades. It's not one of the most efficient ways though. This is a book to help you focus your energy on the more efficient aspects of improving your grade and less on studying. You may save a ton of time not studying but you are going to have to be willing to put more effort in your class and assignment time. It saves you time but it's not magically solving all your school related problems. Looking at this strategy as a way to eliminate studying forever is restricting. It's better to think about it as a strategy to constantly push you towards not needing to study.

You can't just stop studying tomorrow and expect great results. It's a long term change in the way you think and work that allows you to keep your grades

high without sacrificing the time required for studying. This month you may reduce your studying from an hour to a half hour. A month later you might cut it to a half hour every two days. A year or two from now you may only need to study for short intermittent periods to maximize your grades. Studying slowly becomes optional.

So... without further ado:

1. Intelligence Is (Almost) Irrelevant

Intelligence and doing well in school have less to do with each other than most people think.

Studies have repeatedly shown that self-discipline is a better predictor of high grades than IQ. While IQ obviously plays a role, most students would be better off academically if they had more discipline and less IQ. The scientists running these studies often theorize that the reason for self-discipline having a higher correlation to higher grades is that self-disciplined students are more likely to study and complete the required work for class.

It doesn't matter how intelligent a person is. If they don't complete their required studying and work, they're going to tend to do worse. *The advantage of a high IQ is quickly lost when competing against students willing to put in more effort than you.*

This is an important point to understand when starting to learn how to reduce your study time dramatically (or eliminate it completely.) Studies showing how unimportant IQ is to grades introduce 2 important ideas.

1. Being intelligent isn't required to do well in school.

If you look in the most elite colleges in the world, you'll find countless students that made it as far as they have because of their effort. They put in tens of thousands of hours and made up for their lack of natural gifts. In those same schools, you'll definitely find natural gifted students too.

For our purposes, there is another type of student you'll find in those schools. You typically have to look a little harder to find these students because they're in a tiny minority. These are the students that aren't gifted and don't put in a ton of effort (in the traditional sense) but still do well. This is the type of student that's figured out how to multiply their efforts.

2. Studying Is Only A Small Factor

When scientists discuss the value of self-discipline, they often mention the importance of studying. They say students that study more do better than students that are naturally gifted. My experience with thousands of students has suggested this is a smaller factor than one might expect.

Correlating studying with grades is a convenient way to explain their findings but the vast majority of the scientists eventually have to mention the other factors related to self-discipline.

Students with self-discipline may study more. They

also complete their required work for class. They also take the time to look into the more mundane aspects of the syllabus. They also push themselves harder to pay attention in class. They also go to bed earlier at night. They also eat better... The advantages of self-discipline over intelligence goes way beyond studying.

The strategies taught in this book don't rely on you being a super genius. I certainly don't fit in the super genius category.

They're designed to be used by the average student. The average student in the average classroom does not have to spend any time studying to get good grades. (The average student in the average classroom does not have to study much to get extraordinary grades.)

Doubting your own capabilities is your number one challenge when looking to eliminate or reduce studying. Those doubts will constantly distract you from giving your complete effort. If you go in thinking, "this is impossible for me but I guess I'll try," you're likely to prove yourself right.

Eliminate those doubts because, for the most part, those doubts are completely illogical.

Grades and IQ aren't correlated well. Stop thinking that you might be the exception to that rule.

2. Testable Hypotheses And The Scientific Method

Treat the elimination of your study routine like an experiment.

This is a section that you should come back to later but it's important to understand it from the beginning. It's a fundamental concept for improving your efficiency at anything.

Before starting the experiment, you want to come up with a hypothesis. You need to think about what you'd expect to happen when you implement the strategies you learn. After that, you should be tweaking the experiment to make sure you're pushing towards the results you're looking to get. So... if you're looking to just cut down your time investment in school, you might propose doing less than suggested. If you're looking for perfect grades then you might want to use only some of the strategies from this book.

(This might sound odd when it comes to being scientific but virtually all scientists work this way. Cancer researchers don't research cancer to satisfy their curiosity. They couldn't get paid for that and most people would find it boring anyway. They design their experiment in hopes of discovering a certain specific result. In their case, they're looking for a cure or

something that pushes people closer towards the cure.)

Once you have a general idea of the grades you're looking to achieve you need to turn that idea into a testable hypothesis. A testable hypothesis requires a timeframe and a measurable result.

A good testable hypothesis would be: "These strategies should increase my grades to an A average within two months of starting."

A bad hypothesis would be: "These strategies should make me feel better about my study time and grades."

While most students don't create hypothesis consciously before starting, this is a bad hypothesis that many students learn to live by.

The development of a testable hypothesis allows you to keep better track of whether or not what you're doing is working. If, after a few months of reducing your studying, you're not seeing the result you want then you need to start tweaking something.

By setting that specific goal and deadline in advance, you never allow yourself to get caught up thinking "well... I sort of saw some improvement," or worse, "I haven't met the deadline yet but maybe I'll just go back to what I was doing before."

The secret to success is the experimentation. You need to be willing to complete consistent experiments. If you're unwilling to run your study routine (or lack thereof) like an experiment then you're never going to be able to solidify a more powerful routine other than by pure dumb luck.

By all means, your scientific experiment are not going to be all that scientific. You shouldn't expect to write up experiments perfect enough to get them submitted to an academic journal. Considering, you should be the only sample in this experiment, it would never happen. Personal experiments do, however, have an advantage that can easily be underestimated.

There are too many factors to practically measure related to grades without it being completely inaccurate. Using thousands of subjects in an experiment, it's pretty much a given that the experiment isn't all that useful. Maybe the tested hypothesis is more consistently correct but maybe the sample was corrupted by something hard to control for.

The reality is that the sample size you have is as big as it needs to be. If you're running study experiments for yourself, *it doesn't matter if it doesn't work for your neighbor or your pet llama, all that matters is that it works for you.* If you're running that experiment on yourself then you will know whether or not it works for you.

Your study experiments don't need to be noteworthy to anyone other than yourself.

3. Measure Results

One of the most surprising things I've noticed about the average student's study results over the years sounded kind of silly when I first noticed it. After years of sitting on the idea, I noticed that it's actually been an idea floating around in different circles for decades now.

Here is the surprising idea:
The act of measuring something improves it.

One of the quickest ways to start improving your grades is to start actually paying attention to them.

The vast majority of people have bad grades because they just don't pay attention to their grades. Sure... they might tuck their crappy grade in their bag and be a little disappointed but they'll just let that low grade crumble up and get forgotten. It might sting for a minute but in no time at all, they're pretending it never existed to begin with.

When you start tracking your grades, you're forced to start looking at them more seriously. When you put the grades in a single place and are forced to look at that single place every time you add your next entry, every time you look at that data you'll get reminded about your mistakes (and successes.)

This constant reminder of your grades is a force that can unconsciously increase your focus. Even without actually trying to improve your grades, you'll notice your grades get a boost when you start this tracking process. It becomes automatic. You'll start doing things to improve your grades because the pain of those low grades will be sticking with you.

This isn't the only reason to measure though.

You need to consistently measure your results to test whether or not your strategy is meeting your expectations. While it may be easy to just track your results when you meet your deadline, it's better to consistently watch your results and look for notable trends with them.

When you start paying attention to your grades more consistently you can find the individual strategies that work best for you. If you notice that you do better with a certain style class or teacher, you get to use that information to improve your grades in the future. If you notice you get distracted by certain things, knowing this in advance can help you plan for it appropriately.

Tracking is a long term investment that can pay off in the long run. In the short run, it will provide a relatively small boost to your grades. Remember this though: consistently scoring a few extra points on every

assignment will quickly add up to a major impact on your final grade.

4. Impossible Becomes Possible

It should look impossible right now.

By *it*, I'm referring to virtually any final grade goal worth pursuing.

It's easy to look at something difficult and make the assumption that it's impossible (or at the very least, impossible for you.) It's also easy to make the assumption that it's just more difficult than you're willing to follow through with. In reality, you might be right but there is a funny thing about this assumption.

When you assume something is impossible you're giving yourself permission to give up at it. People that look at that same impossible task but succeed at it, don't see something impossible. In fact, they often naively see it as possible.

That naivety is what gets them to start.

People that see things as possible get things done because they're willing to start.

They often start by doing the parts of the task they can do confidently. Then they do another part that's possible. Then maybe they'll do a part that looks difficult and they'll stumble their way through that.

Eventually, while the other guy is still thinking it's impossible, the guy that actually started is all done.

If you were to give up studying completely today then you should expect your grades to suffer. That can make giving up studying completely look impossible. It may be impossible... today. But what is impossible today isn't necessarily impossible tomorrow. Tomorrow, ideally, you will know more.

Take this strategy in steps before going to the extremes. Start by reducing your study time and using some of the strategies recommended in this book (and perhaps the SmartStudentSecrets.com website.) As you continue to measure your results and complete short term experiments, you'll start to see that what was once impossible becomes more and more possible with every experience you have.

A pro athlete doesn't get born. They spendspend decades training their skills and muscles to do exactly what they need them to do when they need them to do it. While they were children, it might have been impossible for them to become a pro at their sport. They were smaller, weaker, and less skilled. Naturally though, they will grow up and that may change. If the child plays basketball, continues doing well for years, and grows to 6'5" then suddenly impossible doesn't look so tough.

This is an easy analogy to get for a child growing up

but it's intimately related with the situation most students will find themselves in. The child at 4'-0" isn't thinking about how hopeless their basketball situation is. They're too busy getting skilled. Many grownups would say they're just ignorant.

"That child has short parents. It's a waste of time."

And sometimes they're right but, sometimes, they're wrong.

What looks impossible right now may not look so impossible with a little bit more experience under your belt. In my experience, reducing your study time intelligently tends to take at least a month before the results look consistently better. Eliminating studying completely can take months to do while seeing top notch grades.

That can seem like a long time but if you never get started then it will take forever.

Catching Up

“I put in the effort but I just can’t seem to get the results. I’m looking for.”

This is the kind of thing you read all the time when you run a study blog. The majority of students looking for advice studying are suffering from this same problem. For some reason or another, they spent a portion of their life not really caring about their grades. This particular student I’m paraphrasing was discussing the problem right before this. He told me:

“I spent ~~Sophomore~~~~Sophomore~~ year slacking off. I passed my classes but I kind of skimmed through it all. I didn’t pay much attention. I was actually kind of surprised how well I did based on how little I worked at it.”

People rarely see an immediate drop in their grades when they start lowering their effort.

That delayed effect is what this student was noticing. (This effect is part of the reason switching to a low study routine isn’t all that dangerous to a student’s grades. Long term you need a solid plan.) As long as a student hands in most of their work, they can usually slide right through the class. This is partially because the work isn’t dramatically out of the

students skill level.

As long as the student has a good base of knowledge, they can usually put almost no effort into learning more and still keep a light grip on the information getting presented in class. They already know enough to figure out the tough questions on tests and assignments.

Once this slack time expands too long it starts to become a problem. All that unlearned knowledge does add up. Eventually, if you're not actively increasing your knowledge, you will not be able to keep up anymore. Once that happens, it's deadly to your grade.

This is why bad students tend to stay bad students. The challenge is no longer about learning what they need to learn. It becomes relearning stuff they should have learned while still trying to learn what they need to learn. That is dramatically more difficult than just learning the information well the first time.

No student should expect to be able to do well without appropriate study time if they're behind in class. If you're struggling through class because of knowledge you failed to learn properly in the past then you're not going to be able to keep up while not putting that extra effort in.

The following strategies are designed to help you

catch back up in the areas you're struggling. Most students shouldn't have to worry about these strategies for most of their classes but don't be surprised if one or two of your classes would benefit from applying them. It's better to play it safe and follow these strategies if you have any doubt in your ability.

After applying them you can actually reduce your study time.

5. Know What You Don't Know

When you're struggling to catch up in a class, one of the hardest and most important things to figure out is *where you're struggling*.

When a student puts a low effort into a class for a few months, they may still learn most of the information they need to learn. Oftentimes, the information that they do learn during those low effort periods become a bit of a crutch preventing them from learning the other information.

If you learned one particular method of solving a problem then you're going to be able to use that information to keep up in the class to some extent. Shovels may be preferred for digging a hole but using you can still get the job done digging with your hands. You may not know the exact preferred methods to solving every particular problem but you can often get the job done using your most primitive tools.

In a math class, this might come down to equations. There are often multiple ways to solve a problem. Knowing a basic way may be able to get the job done but it will often be significantly more complicated than another way. In many classes, you can get away with avoiding using the methods you don't know for a while. Eventually though, this can bite you.

There comes a day when a student is actually required to use those other methods to solve their problem. When that day comes, they suddenly have to learn something that, to the teacher and other student's in the class, seems rather basic. If it was just this problem, it would be a little embarrassing but it wouldn't be so bad.

The biggest part of this problem is how difficult it is to actually find the information that you don't know. When a student has been using a crutch to solve some particular kind of problem for a long time, the student may not even come to realize what information they don't know. To them, they just see a unexplainable failure. ("Why did I get that wrong?")

The key to finding out what you don't know is two-fold.

First of all, you need to start recording the information that you don't know. If you catch yourself struggling at something, you need to write it down somewhere. Catching up and learning that information isn't always immediately actionable but when it becomes actionable, you want to be able to take advantage of it.

Digging to find more information that you don't know is a useful option if you're seriously behind in a class. Take some time to take sample quizzes (perhaps on a site like Khan Academy.) Keep taking sample

questions until you start to run into areas that you're struggling. Once you find those areas, write them down too.

This should all be focused on you finding out where you think that you struggle. If you choose to put in the effort, this is where you'll learn the solutions to most of your problems.

The second part of finding where you struggle is to start getting feedback from other people. In an ideal world, you could ask a personal tutor which areas you seem to be struggling on. They might be able to get significantly more specific than you can. Asking your teacher if they catch anything you do wrong is an alternative (but you'll often get very little feedback if your teacher has a lot of students. It's also a little rude if the teacher has already red marked it 30 times.)

Worst case scenario, dig out every old test that you have and start keeping track of all the questions you got wrong. Could you answer those questions confidently now? If not, then it's probably an area you need to catch back up on.

After you know what you don't know, it's time to start figuring out how to know it.

6. Find Good Sources

Information is easy to find. Inspiration is harder.

Once you realize you have some stuff that you need to catch up for in a course, you need to look for sources that can help you learn it.

This isn't all that hard. There are sources all over the internet that can teach you what you need to know about virtually any subject. There are loads of books to do the same. There was a time when learning the required information was a bit of a challenge. Today, there are countless resources. That comes with a problem.

With so many sources available to learn what you need to learn, it can be difficult to decide the best source to try and learn it from. I'm sure you could find plenty of terrible sources to learn information from. While information might be right at our fingertips, it's still tough to dig through the different options in order to find the one that works for your particular goals.

In most cases, I recommend gathering tons of options and spending a few minutes to find the ones that inspire you most.

For example, if you need to learn the quadratic

equation, you might look into your textbook, another math book you have, and a handful of websites. You should make sure all these sources are easily available when you're ready to try and learn the information. After gathering the information you should glance at all of them and try to see which source catches your interest the most.

The most interesting source won't always teach you what you need to know but it should be your starting point. The interesting source can give you the basic knowledge and inspiration you need to use a different source to learn the rest of the information.

By casting a wide net and gathering a ton of options, you're more likely to find a source that knows how to make the material interesting to you. Then... if it doesn't teach you everything you need to know, you have plenty of other sources to learn information from.

When you start digging into alternative sources, you might start to realize your textbook is a terrible place to start trying to learn something. I'll go over the specific reasons why later on but don't feel bad about this. Textbooks have their place. That place is not inspiring students to want to learn.

The great thing about alternative sources is that **they're often required to focus on catching the student's interest.** When a person wants to get a student to use their resource, they need to find a way

to catch their interest. While textbook publishers have to please the teachers and administrators, independent sources have to please their viewers to keep getting their interest.

After you decide you need to catch up on information for class, you need to start looking for alternative resources. In most cases, I'd treat this process casually. Do the occasional search on forums or google and you might find something. Even without that, having listed the kind of information you're looking for, you'll often be surprised when good options just seem to fall in front of you. You might be searching the web mindlessly when you just stumble on a source that seems to teach what you need to know. Take advantage of this serendipity.

Once you build a comfortable number of sources, or you know you need to start the catching up process, it's time to start learning what you need to catch up on from these sources.

7. Short Term Pushes

There are many different approaches to learning information you need to catch up on for class.

In most cases, I wouldn't give the advice I'm going to give for this situation. The only reason I'm recommending this strategy is because catching up for class is a short term goal. That makes this strategy reasonable. For day to day studying, this is a rather ineffective approach.

When catching up for class, I recommend planning out short bursts of heavily studying the required material from good sources at least 5 or 6 times a day. When you've fallen behind in a class, there are a lot of good reasons to rush learning the information you need to catch up on. While studying consistently and slowly would offer more consistent and efficient results, there isn't enough time for efficient results.

If you're in class and you need to learn information to catch up then it's best to learn that information fast because there is an immediate advantage to learning it. You can see and use the results sooner.

If you were on summer break or something, that might be a good reason to take your time catching up on the information for class. Then again, you might find it

easier to do short term pushes during summer break because you have more time. Ultimately, it comes down to whichever strategy you think will work better for you.

When I talk about short term pushes, you should imagine mini-cram sessions with reasonable breaks in-between them and plenty of days off. If you were the average student looking to catch up in a class you might set up one long day of studying information you need to catch up on. Study for an hour session and take 15 minutes off. Repeat this 3 or 4 times on a day when you have plenty of time for it. This session won't be too efficient but when you need to catch up, efficiency should be less of a concern.

This kind of studying can be painful but it's a short term pain. When you catch back up in your classes, you're going to be able to get through classes without this amount of studying. I've found myself catching up in classes within three or four days of using this style of session. I spread each individual day away from the other study days to make it a little less painful.

A student that's further behind may need more than just a few days. Often, for students that have been behind for multiple years, I'd recommend hiring a tutor for part of this study time.

This is an area that separates students that become successful and students that struggle. If you've ever

heard of the marshmallow test, this is a prime example of it.

Scientists were able to predict the future success of children reasonably accurately by giving the children the following test.

They put a marshmallow on a plate in front of the child. The child was then told something like, “if you wait 5 minutes and don’t eat that marshmallow, we’ll give you two marshmallows.” Children that could wait the 5 minutes tended to be more successful later in life.

Putting in short bursts of studying to catch up in class is tough. It doesn’t immediately show its value but once you catch up in those classes (and it’s often difficult to get there) it becomes a downhill ride. It will be dramatically harder for you to fall behind using the strategies this book teaches than for you to keep up.

8. Don't Know It. Get It.

There are two major styles for preparing for a test.

The style I'd typically recommend is studying for the required facts and not spending too much time worrying whether or not you actually understand the material. This is usually the most efficient way to spend study time when your looking to reach a natural peak with your grades.

When you're looking to reduce study time to a minimum, you should still treat any study time you have in this way. It's the most efficient way to study because it shows nearly guaranteed results if you do it right. If you focus on trying to actually understand the information, it can end up taking a significantly longer amount of time.

As you're trying to eliminate study time completely, you need to focus your attention on your ability to understand the information you're learning for class. Study time can make up for your limitations in understanding. Study time is a good safety net. Without study time, you need to put a significant focus on understanding the information while it's being presented to you.

If you're listening to the teacher discuss the material

in class, you need to be trying to put the pieces together as the teacher speaks. Since you plan on spending little to no time reviewing that information, you need to try to get as deep an understanding as you can get as fast as possible. That means, to some extent, you may have to stop worrying about particular details.

Instead of the details, you need your attention to be on how what your teacher is teaching relates to everything else that you're learning. The details will often follow when you figure that much out.

You should also be using assignment time to make sure you understand the material. If you get a question that you can quickly breeze through, it might be better to sit and think about it a while. This isn't a traditional study routine, and it isn't required but it can offer you an efficient use of your time doing the assignments. Instead of mindlessly doing them, you're consciously learning about them.

This is the difference between repetition and deliberate practice.

At times, you might get the opportunity to learn more at the expense of a couple points.

For example, during one quiz I remember in college, I had a bit of an epiphany about how to solve some particular problem in math class. I was limited on time

but I ended up skipping a couple problems just so I could get that one important question right. Since I wasn't investing time in studying (or much of the homework,) I figured I'd rather learn something new than get every point on the quiz.

While that is rarely smart practice, you need to be willing to push understanding as the first priority. When you understand something, it becomes possible to solve significantly more problems than when you're just learning the facts. The problem with understanding is that it's a whole lot harder to trust on a day to day basis.

Studying consistently will offer a more consistent grade but understanding can offer you more points on average. You'll have higher highs and lower lows when you're fighting to understand the material.

9. Missing Links

When you've developed a little bit of a list of information that you need to catch up on in your classes, the sequence that you choose to proceed is often of utmost importance. If you select the right order then you'll learn the information you need to learn quickly and painlessly. If you select the wrong order then you might end up spinning your wheels hopelessly for hours at a time.

Sometimes you need information to understand later information completely. When you've fallen behind in a class, you'll find that much of the information you're struggling with is linked to one another in some way.

Knowledge is very similar to a web page with links connecting different semi-related pages. If you look at Abraham Lincoln's knowledge, you'd find links going to the civil war, slavery, and all kinds of other semi-related subjects. This single page of knowledge on Lincoln would add something to your knowledge on all those related subjects. On top of that, knowing the information on those other pages would teach you something about Lincoln.

Knowledge is intimately connected with other knowledge.

Most students struggle to learn information because their failing to find links to other information that relates to what they're learning. If a student is struggling to write grammatically correct sentences, it's often related to their inexperience with reading grammatically correct writing. Students that expose themselves to ton of writing, even without trying, end up with loads of grammatically correct examples to build off of.

When you don't have the initial links to connect to, your brain is unable to recognize the required patterns to learn what it needs to learn. If you handed the average grade school student a calculus exam, it doesn't matter how long you give the student sitting in a room with a test, they'll probably never figure out even the basics. If you put a person that's been through pre-cal in a calculus exam, they might not get everything but they're significantly more likely to have a few good attempts at answering the questions.

When you're looking at the information that you need to learn, you want to look for the most basic missing links earliest. If you struggle with grammar then it's more important that you learn that then it is you learn how to write a persuasive essay. If you're struggling with division then you probably shouldn't be worrying about the quadratic equation just yet.

These are some pretty unlikely examples but they're meant solely to illustrate the problem. In most cases,

it will be difficult to see which information links to later information you need to learn. The quickest way to do this is to just figure out which grade level you were supposed to learn a subject. The earlier the grade level you were expected to of learned it, the earlier you should be learning it now.

If you have more resources at your disposal, you might want to hire a tutor for just this aspect of your learning. An expert on the subject can help you figure out which information is most important, and which information can be put aside for later. This might end up dramatically different than the grade level strategy because catching up on certain obscure early subjects may be less important than keeping up on the subject you're currently working through.

The fundamental point to realize is this: make the sequencing decisions consciously. It makes a big difference.

Course Selection

“Someone told me he was an easy grader,” my friend was telling me.

I raised an eyebrow at him. He laughed a little. I was a little surprised because the friend I was talking to always scored high grades. Before that moment I had just assumed he did it because he was focused on the actual academics. This was in high school before I started to boost my own grades. “Better be careful though,” I said, “you might accidentally learn something.”

I hate to be the one to shatter anyone’s academic fantasies but this kind of course selection is absolutely huge when it comes to students that care about their GPA. Not all but a good percentage of students that hold high GPAs have made course selection decisions based on this criteria.

If you were considering applying to a difficult college to get into, I think you’d be nuts not to be taking advantage of easy courses and graders. Your competition is going to be milking every point of their GPA through easy classes, if you fail to take advantage of it, you’re going to be at a major disadvantage.

We all might like to think about course selection in terms of learning. You would, ideally, want to pick the teachers that would teach you the most information. It may not be easier but it would provide the most value for you as the student. If a student were to focus 100% on selecting courses with teachers that were skilled at teaching then I wouldn't fault them for that.

Here is the problem:

Most students never even think about this information in course selection. The average student selects their courses solely on the convenience of their schedule. They end up thinking, "I don't want to do math early in the morning..." and make their decision based on those kinds of silly preferences.

I would take a math course on the moon at 3 AM if it was the right teacher. If you're worried about your GPA then you should be willing to wake up a little early if it helps you get into a class that would improve that GPA. These kinds of decisions can make a huge impact on your final grades.

Before you sign up for any class, you should make some effort to find a good reason (beyond schedule) to take that course. You should find out if the teacher is good at their job. You should find out if the class is easy. You should find out how much of the course is related to the tests. All this information is all around you.

In high school, this is usually more difficult. You may have to ask other students and hope they can give you a reasonable opinion.

In college, this is unbelievably easy. You can talk to friends about the teachers. You can contact the teachers directly and ask them a few questions (don't ask if they're easy graders! Think through the questions carefully.) You can look online for class reviews. You can even try out the courses before you sign up for them.

Take advantage of this information and you'll have a whole new set of opportunities at your fingertips. Suddenly you'll have the power to improve your grade with only a few minutes of extra work at the beginning of the semester. More importantly, in my opinion, you'll have the power to avoid bad teachers and boring classes that can often kill your motivation to focus.

One bad teacher or class can ruin your day for months at a time.

10. High Grade Classes

The first kind of class you should be on the lookout for is a class you can expect a high grade in for just showing up. This can come in a number of different forms.

One variety is a class with a teacher that is an easy grader. When a teacher doesn't hold their student up to high standards, the teacher makes it a very attractive class for students that are looking to keep their grades high. Easy grading teachers are good for your immediate GPA but you need to be careful selecting their class.

Some easy grading teachers actually teach their students the required information. They make an effort to provide all the information the student needs to pass in their next related class. The teacher may give their students high marks but it's not because they don't care about the students learning the information.

Other easy grading teachers are just looking to survive another semester. They give easy grades to make sure a good percentage of their students are happy at the end of their class. Whether or not they actually teach the required information well isn't all that important to them. Sure... they probably try to get

the basics down so future teachers don't complain too much but teaching the students is a minor priority.

Ideally, you only want to work with an easy grading teacher if they're actually going to give you a good chance to learn the required information. If you don't learn the required information then your short term GPA boost may end up costing you a large GPA drop when you hit a later class.

Another variety of high grade class is the easy class in general. Some classes are well known to provide higher grades than average. (You don't go to Calculus to boost your GPA. You might go to an art class for it.) While many classes get a reputation as easy, it's almost always partially based on the teacher and the following criteria. Never trust that a class is easy without first checking if it's just the teacher or the grading criteria.

Grading criteria can regularly create another variety of high scoring classes. In most cases, this should be one of your top priorities when you're looking into selecting a class. Some classes provide students with high scores based on the grading criteria.

A good example of this was a class I took in college. On the syllabus the teacher listed Attendance as 20% of the final grade.

Thinking about that in another way, you could hand in

perfect assignments but if you showed up the minimum amount and scored nothing for attendance, you'd still get a B. Another 50% of the grade was homework. To make it even more obvious, the teacher gave only a few questions for homework every night. (That homework could often be finished while sitting at my desk a few minutes after class.) This is a class that would take a serious effort not to pass.

Take advantage of classes that are willing to give you a high score for just showing up and doing low time investment work.

With all this in mind, you need to balance it out a bit. The more you get caught up taking easier classes for grades sake, the more likely you're going to get bored and stop putting in the required effort to do well in a tough class. If you find yourself getting lazy then the long term costs of that can outweigh the benefits of a short term boost in GPA.

There is another variety of class that you should be looking into when you're reducing your study time dramatically. While easier courses tend to be the first kind of class you should look for, the following kind of class should come next.

11. Low Testing Courses

When your goal is to eliminate study time from your day to day life, you should start looking for ways to get away from testing. Homework assignments, essays, and open book exams are your bread and butter. They allow you to ignore the little details and focus on the more important aspects to understand.

Studying is very useful for memorizing the minor details. The most difficult part of most tests is dealing with the minor details. If you pay attention in class and do most of the work for the class, you're bound to have a general idea what's going on come test time. The challenge comes from trying to actually locate the specific details you need to present to prove you understand it.

When you're allowed to look stuff up in your textbook, remembering the minor details isn't all that important. You just need to know where to look in the textbook and you'll find it. When you're taking the test, this is usually not an option. That's the reason most students need to spend time studying.

There are classes that make testing a tiny priority. I've taken courses where there were only two tests at the middle and end of the year where they made up only a small percentage of the final grade. These are the

kinds of classes that make it easy to stay stress free without studying.

When deciding if a course is low testing, the first thing to look for is how much testing has to do with your final grade. You can usually figure this out looking at the class syllabus. (You can ask the teacher for a copy before the class starts.) The lower the percentage, the less you need to worry about how well you do on tests. For example, if testing is only 10% of your final grade then scoring 50% on all of them would still let you score a solid A in the class.

The next thing to try and figure out is the frequency of testing and the style of testing.

When a class has a lot of tests, it just means that each test is less important. That should mean they're easier to stay stress free on. Bombing one of ten tests isn't all that bad. Bombing one of three is bad (assuming they're not low value from your final grades perspective.)

It often doesn't work so smoothly though. If you're the kind of person that gets stressed out because of tests then it's sometimes better to focus on taking classes with fewer tests. You may get more stressed out but it won't be a regular occurrence.

Or, long term, it might be better to take a ton of tests and learn to enjoy them. This is the kind of decision

you'll need to make yourself.

The style of testing is also important. As mentioned earlier, open book tests are ideal. You might even consider taking a class that grades heavily based on tests if those tests are open book.

The next kind of test to look for might surprise you. Look for testing that's more open answer. When you know what's going on in a class but aren't practiced in the details, open answer questions let you sound like you know what you're talking about.

Traditionally, multiple choice questions have a good reputation. If you're not studying though, they can be significantly more challenging. Multiple choice questions can easily mix up important similar concepts to make sure the student knows the details. This can cause significant problems for the student that's not focused on studying those details.

12. Find Your Preferred Focus

Of course, all of this course selection criteria should be slightly less important than your own personal preferences.

First of all, if you like a particular subject then you're dramatically more likely to do well in that subject. That is an advantage that you should take advantage of every chance you get. It's one of the quickest ways to boost your GPA because it helps focus your energy in the direction you're most interested in seeing it going.

Most course selection, probably, can't come down to that priority. Education is usually too "well-rounded" for every student to love every class that they need to get through. After you find the particular subject you want to take, you can also narrow it down further using the other criteria. (Why not have an easy grader that knows how to teach in a course you enjoy?)

Another criteria that's often underestimated in importance is how much you like the teacher. This might sound strange but many students get good at in certain class because they found a single teacher that got them to like it. If you find a teacher you like then that teacher's likability alone will improve your ability to focus on the subject. In many cases, I'd recommend selecting a teacher you know you like

over a teacher you know will grade you easier. It may hurt your grade in the short term but it has the chance of permanently improving your ability at the subject.

This is a hard criteria to act on because it's hard to get to know a teacher before taking their class. In college, there is a simple solution. Take advantage of the opportunity to sit into any classes you're planning to take.

One experiment showed that the first impression of a teacher was almost always in line with their long term opinion of the teacher. By sitting through a single class you can almost always tell if the teacher is going to be boring, annoying, frustrating, or unpleasant in any other way. You can also tell if they look like they'd be fun to listen to in class. In most cases, this first opinion will be right.

Some less important criteria that should be considered:

- Your sleep schedule. You should be able to have a consistent sleep schedule. Rarely select courses that make you wake up earlier than usual (or , less likely, make you go to bed late.)
- Your time preferences make some difference. Sure... it's silly to think you're not good at math earlier in the morning but if there isn't a more

important criteria then consider it.

- Your eating preferences. Just like your sleep schedule, you should try and adjust your classes around your eating schedule. While most students don't eat at a regular schedule, in another section I'll be mentioning why that usually isn't the best choice.
- How it interacts with other courses. In college, you get the privilege of creating your own schedule. You can load all your classes into a single day or split them up so you're taking only a class a day. In my experience, packing classes into a single day is more effective but either way, it's alright to adjust your decisions a little based on how you want your schedule lined up.

Unlimited Focus

Most students use studying to make up for all the stuff they didn't pay attention to in class.

Class, particularly when you're not careful with your course and teacher selection, can get awfully boring. While most students can force themselves to focus through a reasonable percentage of their class, they end up losing focus for short periods of time that create the need for learning the material later.

A single day when the student is tired or sick or distracted can end up causing them to fall behind. That falling behind requires studying and learning to correct.

There will always be moments when you lose focus in class but there are steps you can take that make those moments dramatically less common.

The first of those steps were just discussed. It's essential that you make an effort to select courses that won't get you too bored. That means look for lecturers that don't make you want to zone out and daydream about the person a few rows in front of you. This will make the following strategies for gaining focus easier and more effective.

One of the most important things to note about focus is that it's something that can be improved. One of the fastest ways to improve it is to just make it habitual.

Lets face it... you have to go to class... I know... you may not literally have to go to class but the vast majority of teachers make showing up a requirement. (This is less important in college but if the teacher can recognize when you're there or not then you should assume the teacher is going to grade you for it.)

Teachers assume that students that don't show up, don't care. They grade based on that perception. If there is any subjectivity in their grading at all, your attendance is going to improve your grades. It's the kind of difference that can turn a good paper into a great paper according to the teacher. (They're humans. They like to feel like they've made a great student.)

If you have to go to class then you might as well not waste that class time. You can sit there and daydream but in many cases, it's smarter to keep your eyes and mind on the teacher. Once you have a few tools at your disposal and select the right courses, this isn't all that difficult. Once you start focusing consistently for a while, it becomes a habit.

Once focusing becomes a habit you'll notice that distractions become much less common. When you're going to class you might be thinking about something

completely unrelated but once you sit down and prepare yourself for class, your mind goes right where it's supposed to go. As with many aspects of these study strategies, you can't fully appreciate it until you make it automatic.

Once focus gets to this level you can start to make sure you're using the focus even more discriminately to learn faster. Sometimes the teacher will be talking about things that aren't important. If, during those times, your brain is thinking about more important stuff related to class, you'll be much better off.

13. Take “Notes”

Many people advise students to take notes in class. That's not what this section is really about. It's a part of it but it's only one potential strategy to do what this section is recommending.

Some students that take notes for class end up distracting themselves. They try to keep up with all the points the teacher is mentioning and end up struggling to keep up. They write page after page of notes while not really understanding the gist of the information. They do this, in hopes that they'll figure it out when they start reviewing their notes.

This is not all that useful for a student that wants to limit their study time. It's just recording information that the student would probably never remember without studying anyway. Even for students that plan on studying, this tends to be a bad practice.

This is not the kind of note taking I'm talking about.

Some students write discriminate notes. They think through what the teacher is saying before putting it on paper. They tend to write fewer notes for this reason. They ensure notes come second after processing the information. If they can't properly process the information, they don't try to take detailed notes on it.

This is the kind of note taking you should consider using.

Note taking is good because it helps a student focus on the teacher and information. It remains good, as long as it's continuing towards that goal. As soon as it becomes a distraction it's a problem.

When a student is taking notes, they know whether or not they're focused on the class. They have an objective goal of writing good notes for the class. At the end of class, that objective goal is either met or not met. The student has some objective standard to recognize when they were focusing well. With that objective standard, they're able to learn what works for them and what doesn't.

Note taking has advantages.

It doesn't have to be done on pen and paper. Once you get good at focusing, you can process information the teacher is presenting in a similar way to notetaking without actually writing information down. This will leave you with less resources in the future but it will lead to more focus in the moment. That increased focus is particularly useful when you don't plan to study the information anyway. As long as you're focusing effectively, you're going to do fine without writing notes down on paper.

Whether or not to write notes usually should come down to personal preference. If it helps you then consider doing it. If it distracts you then you shouldn't be doing it. That being said, if you're not physically taking notes, you need to be very self aware. You need to know if you're really focusing or not. If you catch your mind drifting then it might be time to pull out some paper and try to keep your brain on track.

Take notes, even if they are just in your own head.

14. Limit Questions

Don't get caught up in the common recommendation teachers give to ask lots of questions in class.

Students asking the teacher questions in class usually helps the teacher more than they help themselves. That is, assuming the teacher is making an effort to improve their classes. Often, asking questions in class directly hurts the student in a number of different ways.

Some teachers are good about questions in class. If you ask the question then they'll answer it. Despite that, if you're asking a question that you should already know the answer to, the teacher does change their perception of you.

As much as people like to treat teachers as noble creatures unaffected by human emotions, they're just humans. If you ask a question that the teacher already mentioned the answer to, it's going to hurt your grades. (Never forget the subjectivity of most grading systems. If you're not taking standardized tests then your teacher's opinion of you does matter.)

This is only a small part of the problem though.

Teachers design their lectures to teach the required

curriculum. If a teacher is teaching something, it probably has some importance for future tests. If you're just curious to learn something semi-related to the subject, the teacher may answer you but there is no way to know whether or not that information is going to be on the test.

Not asking questions gives your teacher the time to ensure you're presented with all the information required for the test as much as possible. Any questions that distract from the test or assignments make that class time less productive for you.

So... if you didn't pay attention, the teacher won't appreciate your question. If you're following along fine and you're curious about something related, asking a question will take time away from learning what's important for your grade. If you want to ask these kinds of questions, I suggest asking them out of class time.

At times, teachers will explain something poorly. This can tempt you to ask a question for clarification. Whether or not you do this should come down to your comfort in the situation.

Some teachers will immediately assume you not understanding is your own fault. Yes... they'll probably answer your question but it will be used against you. Other teachers are more reasonable to ask clarifying questions to. In either case, it's often better to just

wait for an office time to ask.

Questions are fundamental for getting a really good understanding of a subject but while you're in class isn't the ideal time to be developing those questions. After you're out of class and have some time to think about the information, if you still have the question or develop new questions, then it might be helpful to actually ask them. These are the kinds of questions that people talk about the virtues of. Throwing weak and unthought out questions is more likely to do your grades harm than good.

Use questions carefully when you're trying to focus in class. More often than not, they'll end up being a distraction. Teachers present a lot of information during class. It's better to follow along closely and have unanswered questions than to lose focus trying to formulate what you don't understand.

15. Manage Daydreaming

Daydreaming is one of the most challenging aspects to fight when you're sitting through a class.

The first thing to think about when dealing with daydreaming through class is your own interest.

If you don't find the class interesting then you're bound to try and distract yourself from the material being taught. Fighting to focus will always be an uphill battle until you find some aspect of the class to be interested in. To solve this problem you need to find a reason to be interested in the class. For specifics, check out the Motivation section of this book.

Even once you've established an interest in a subject, you'll still find yourself thinking about things completely unrelated to class while information is being presented to you. Interest can help eliminate the major distractions in your head but it doesn't stop the little moments of distraction that can add up into a major problem.

Giving up daydreaming is nearly impossible given the environment..

School is a situation that looks almost like it was designed to cause your mind to wander. You're

lectured information. Often that information doesn't really matter to the student. You're supposed to sit quietly and listen. The teachers aren't all that interesting most of the time. This isn't how the human mind gets interested.

When you're sitting at your desk daydreaming about the possibility of having a superpower, your mind is putting itself in a scenario it was more prepared for. No... not using superpowers. Your brain is prepared for walking around, talking, doing awesome things, like fighting off enemies. It's prepared for things that were essential to survival thousands of years ago.

Sure... thinking plays a part in this but the humans that sat and contemplated through their life ended up getting picked out of the teeth of their predators.

Instead of fighting this daydreaming, just try to manage it in a responsible way. Design a system to tell when your teacher is discussing something important and when they're not. If the teacher is just telling a story about their day, zoning out into your own world is save. As soon as that teacher starts talking about class material, you need to bring the class back to the forefront of your mind.

Some of your easy classes may end up being good opportunities to spend the whole class daydreaming. This isn't such a good idea for major base classes like math, science, or english but for the more obscure

subjects, it's sometimes a reasonable possibility.

The real goal to remember is to daydream responsibly.

You may not be able to eliminate it but it's very possible to control it in the short term. Take advantage of that. By selecting the times most appropriate for letting your mind wander, you can ensure when you really need to focus, your brain is prepared to do it.

Your goal shouldn't be to turn yourself into the perfect machine.

You only have so much energy in a day. It might be nice to stay focused all the time but that's just going to end up draining you. Constantly fighting away the more lazy aspects of yourself is a battle that you don't have to fight. All you need to do is learn how to put it on the backburner. Perhaps you could think of it as, procrastinating your procrastination. "I'll daydream later..."

Give yourself permission to let your mind wander when it's safe. The more you fight it off, the more you're going to drain yourself. Once you're drained, staying focused when you need it is going to become nearly impossible.

16. Show Up!

The main reason that students fail a class is a failure of attendance.

In most schools, it's hard to fail a class when you actually show up for it. Sure... if you've spent the last 5 years not paying attention and suddenly start showing up, you can fail while showing up but these kinds of failures almost always come from previous attendance problems or failure to complete work.

That brings up the second problem.

The secondary reason that students fail a class is that they don't complete the important work for their class. This failure to complete important work is usually because the student failed to complete much work at all.

In the typical American grading system, scoring a 60% in a class lets you pass it. Most teachers are hesitant to give grades lower than a 50 for anything less than a completely embarrassing effort. Teachers look for excuses to boost super low grades up.

If it looks like you made an effort then, in most cases, you can count on a 50. That means, as long as you're handing something in most of the time, and doing well

on a few important aspects of the class, you're going to have no problem passing.

This all changes when you stop showing up for the class and handing in your work.

First of all, teachers notice when students miss a lot of classes. If the student does well despite this, the teacher will think the student doesn't care and look for excuses to cut their grade down. If the student is failing then the teacher will have no guilt about it. Ask any teacher and they'll almost always agree that they HATE giving F's to students that always show up for class and made an effort.

More importantly than that, when you stop showing up, you're giving your brain absolutely no opportunity to learn the material (unless you decide to study it. If you're looking to reduce study time then showing up becomes essential.)

Even a subpar focus on a boring class will help you remember some information. It's not always the most efficient method to remember information, as long as you are stuck going to class, you might as well make the best of it.

On top of that, when you're focusing in class, you're getting something better than a lesson on the subject.

You're getting to learn the information your teacher is

emphasizing most of all. This emphasis makes sure you know what's important to learn for the test. *The teacher isn't emphasizing it for kicks. If the teacher makes it sound important, you can count on it being tested.*

As soon as you start showing up, a weak focus on the class material will almost always teach you enough to pass the course. Once you start showing up and developing a strong focus during the class, you'll be able to learn most of what you need to learn in that moment. Studying may be helpful but it becomes a bit of an accessory you can use to boost your grades a little more.

Showing up is a necessity if you intend to reduce the amount of time you're studying. It improve your teachers perception of you, it increases your exposure to the class material, and it presents you with the information you're most likely to get tested on.

17. No Distractions

Focus isn't something that should be broken.

The more you allow your focus to be broken, the more excuses you'll find to break that focus. It's better to just keep your attention locked on the required subject until you're finished with it.

When it comes class time, it can be easy to let little things interrupt your brain from what the teacher is saying or what you're supposed to be working on. Your ability to prevent these lapses in focus will have a lot to do with how well you do in reducing or eliminating your study time.

One of the most common distractions students have is their phone. Sitting and texting with friends during class is a huge problem. I know... it doesn't feel like it. Pulling out your phone for ten seconds and shooting a quick text back can seem like a minor offense. The reality usually is a little worse than that though. Is it really only a single text?

Every time you pull out your phone to text someone, you're losing more than just the time it takes for you to text them.

Imagine you're in class focusing on the teacher when

you first feel the vibration of your phone. Instantly, any deep focus you had is gone. Now you might sit there a minute casually. You might even watch your teacher and wait for the right moment to pull out your phone. Suddenly, you're brain is on some kind of a secret spy mission instead of the material you should be paying attention to.

Then you pull out the phone. You read it. And then you might get stuck thinking about a response. If the text happens to say something that upsets you then your brain could be distracted for the rest of class worrying about it. Eventually you respond and put the phone back in your pocket. As of that point, you get to *try* and refocus on the class.

Focus can be thought of at different depths.

When you're focusing with less depth, you can get distracted by any little thing. It often takes time to go from a low depth focus into a high depth focus. When you first get to class, it can take some time before your brain is consistently focused on the class. When you're focusing deeper, you might not even realize someone is talking to you because you're too busy focusing on something else. The deeper the level of focus you're at, the more you're going to be able to learn.

Every time you get distracted, you're leaving the deeper levels of focus and returning to your less

focused state. That means you have to take the time to get back into your deeper focus again. Of course, with a consistent distraction like your phone vibrating, by the time you get back into your deeper focus you might just get distracted by another vibration.

Phones aren't the only distraction though. Some students are distracted by the pen and paper in front of them. Some students are distracted by smiling at the hottie of the class. Some students are distracted by books or homework for other classes.

All these distractions are just going to hurt your ability to learn what you need to learn. If a class is worth focusing on partially then it's worth focusing on completely. If a class isn't worth focusing on then you have bigger problems to worry about. This will get discussed later in the book.

Read The Syllabus

Teachers want their students to succeed in class.

No... I'm not saying the usual "teachers are heroic selfless deities that shine their glorious light down upon the poor useless student's soul." I'm just saying, for human (and selfish) reasons, teachers want their students to succeed. Failing students can reflect poorly on the teacher. The more failing students a teacher has, the harder it becomes for that teacher to keep their job.

Since teachers want their students to succeed, they do things to encourage that goal. Actually teaching the material is one thing they do for that. That is only one thing they do though.

Some teachers work one on one with students whenever a student asks.

Some teachers offer students lots of opportunities for easy points.

Virtually all teachers, hand their students an near exact roadmap for succeeding in their course.

A class syllabus is one of the most powerful pieces of paper you're going to get in your class. If there is one

piece of paper that you want to hold onto for any particular course, this is the one.

It's strange how few students fully appreciate the power of the syllabus they're handed. In the first class, the teacher hands them this sheet of paper and most students let their eyes glaze over as they start thinking about how boring the class is going to be. Some students even go as far as losing the syllabus by the end of the class.

A class syllabus is essentially a "cheat sheet" for the course. Sure... it's not actually cheating but the information you learn from it can dramatically simplify everything you have to do for the course.

No two teachers grade and judge students by the same standards and that sheet of paper makes sure that you invest your time in only the things that particular teacher finds valuable.

There are two major aspects of a syllabus that provide most of the value but always read the whole syllabus because it's one of the quickest ways you have to figure out exactly how the teacher thinks. Some teachers go as far as listing the most important things to learn for the class. This is information that should guide absolutely every decision you make related to the course.

When a student first gets into optimizing their

decisions based on their class syllabus they get the opportunity to increase their grades while saving the energy they would have normally wasted on less valuable aspects of the class.

Teachers create syllabuses for this purpose.

Teachers expect their students to pay attention to the grading policy and make decisions based on it. They don't spend hours perfecting a curriculum to just watch their students fritter away with the details.

Teachers make certain aspects of the course valuable because they want you to invest your energy in it.

(They make certain aspects of the course almost valueless because they don't want you investing your energy in it.)

Why waste one of the most valuable resources you have access to?

Read the syllabus and make your decisions for the class based on what it tells you. The time this saves you will give you dramatically more opportunities to do and focus on what you care about most.

18. Grade Percentages

The first place a student's eyes should go when looking at a class syllabus is the grade percentages for each aspect of the class. In virtually all syllabuses, teachers directly tell you how they're going to be grading you.

They might say 10% of the grade is going to be quizzes, 30% of the grade is going to be tests, 40% homework, and 20% attendance. Using that information, you can put your energy towards the information that turns out to be most valuable for the class.

In some classes, certain aspects of your grade will be weighted so heavily that where to focus your energy becomes obvious. If a teacher bases 80% of your grade on your test scores then you know that your energy should be invested in preparing for those tests. (It's probably not the kind of course you want to be signing up for if you're looking to eliminate studying.) If a teacher bases 80% of your grade on homework then you're going to want to invest most of your energy in that direction.

Other times, these grading percentages aren't quite so obvious to work with. In those cases, it may be easier to focus on the aspects of the course that aren't all

that important to worry about. If an aspect of the course is a very low percentage of your final grade then you know that you shouldn't invest your time in it.

If homework were only 10% of your final grade then you could virtually skip it and still get an A. (In most cases I'd recommend doing it quickly and accepting whatever easy points you could get.)

If the grading balance looks almost even between different aspects of the class then you'll have to focus your energy only on the second aspect of this analysis.

Reading the class syllabus is important but it's not everything. As you're taking the class you're going to understand how much time each aspect of the class takes up. If the homework is worth the same percentage of your grade as some essays you have to write, but the homework ends up taking hours a night and the essays only take a few hours a month then your energy should be invested towards the essays instead of the homework.

In virtually all classes you'll find some dramatically over-weighted aspect of your grade. It's an area of your grade that offers a good percentage of points with virtually no extra work. These are points that you should be investing the time to get. Certain other aspects of the course may take up a ton of time to complete but are worth virtually nothing. These are

the aspects of the course that you should only invest your extra time into (if any time at all.)

The first aspect of deciding where to invest your energy is reading the syllabus. It's a snapshot of how the class should work out for you. You can make a general plan based on this alone. The second aspect of deciding where to invest your energy is based on what work the teacher actually assigns. This is what you should use to constantly adjust your time investment decisions.

When you invest your time in the most valuable aspects of your courses, you get more for the time you invest and have more time left over at the end of the day.

19. Class Policy

I was in the middle of my double course load in college.

It was finals time and I was getting stuck. For the whole semester I had managed the double course load, a part time job, and a few mile commute to college by bike everyday. Now that finals were coming up, it seemed like every teacher wanted to throw important assignments in my direction. I was working every free second I had but I didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

As you can imagine, I was a little bit stressed out at this time. I had started developing my "15 Minute Study Strategy." Using a variation on it I was attempting to complete my degree in half the required time. Up to that point, I was feeling pretty good about myself. When I started hitting that wall I was starting to realize why this idea wasn't so easy.

Eventually, I had a mini-breakdown and started organizing all the papers I had for my classes. I tend to be messy but whenever I get stressed I turn into one of the cleanest people ever. As I was organizing the work I noticed a crumpled up syllabus for one of my engineering courses. I knew how valuable it was at that time but I ended up letting it get forgotten

anyway.

I uncrumpled the syllabus and glanced at it. I started thinking about the pile of work I had to complete for the class. Once my eyes glazed over the syllabus I felt like an idiot for ever being stressed in the first place. It said something like:

Late work will be accepted at a cost of 5 points per week.

At that moment it clicked for me. Some class policies are strict about late work. Others are not strict. In the next ten minutes I had managed to find major assignments that would lose virtually no points if handed in late. I was able to push some of my work for later while losing virtually no points for it.

Since that realization, I've consistently run into class specific tricks for taking advantage of these kinds of class policies. While they're typically unique to the syllabus, they can save a ton of trouble making decisions.

Some teachers give extra credit. Some teachers hardly mind late work. Some teachers offer attendance bonuses. Some teachers let you correct work you get back with red marks. These kinds of policies all have their uses. Keep track of them.

There is no way to list all of the possible class policies

possible and how to take advantage of them but there is virtually always some way for some students. If you find something unique on a syllabus, try to think of a way that someone could use that uniqueness to their advantage. It takes practice to think in this way but you'll find it constantly opens new doors (even outside of school.)

The more you dig into the syllabus, the more ideas you'll find to make your decisions better. The better you make your decisions, the more you'll be able to keep your grades up during the tougher times.

Setting Priorities

Once you have a general idea what's going on in your syllabus, you have all the information that you need to start setting priorities for your classes. These ideas were discussed a bit previously but there are a few more important points to understand to take full advantage of them.

You only have so much time in your day. As much as everyone would like to be able to study and do other work for hours a day and then have plenty of time to enjoy themselves, this isn't going to happen. There is no way around it. In fact, time is one of the only things that you can't increase.

Not all people are born equally intelligent. Not all people are born with the same resources. Not all people are born with the same opportunities. Everyone is born with an equal amount of time in their day. The way that you choose to utilize that time will make a bigger difference than virtually every other decision in your life.

Some people realize this and decide that they're going to become machines. They're going to focus on working as hard as they can as consistently as possible in hopes that this means they're using their time efficiently. That is assuming the meaning of their

life doesn't have to do with their own happiness. Maybe they have some dream that someday they'll change. (They usually don't.)

Other people realize their time limitations and decide they're just going to look for short term enjoyment. (I highly doubt you fit in this category because you probably wouldn't be reading this.) They get the impression that an efficient use of their time is maximizing their time having fun now. They sometime think, "Heck... I could die tomorrow." This idea relies on that concept of potential death because otherwise, they'd just be setting themselves up for suffering in the future.

Setting your priorities should usually involve a kind of Aristotelian mean. You need to look out for your future but you certainly shouldn't be sacrificing all of your enjoyment from today for it.

The way you set your priorities can allow you to maximize the amount of enjoyment you get out of life. It's one of the most powerful decisions you're ever going to make. At times, it's going to be able to relieve you of pressure. Other times, it's going to put you under a little bit of good pressure.

In reality, you can't set priorities poorly. Sure... you can make short sighted decision but as they say, "you could die tomorrow." If you don't die tomorrow then at least you'd know you enjoyed the time before. If you

work hard then you may be better off but you had to sacrifice your younger years for that enjoyment.

Which is the right decision? Is a balance right? I think so but...

The biggest problem most people have is never even trying to set their priorities. This is why people end up looking back at their life and wondering how it all went wrong. It's better to set up a plan in advance, even if the rest of the world doesn't think it's the right one.

20. Class Prioritization

Students need to be prioritizing the time they invest in each of their particular classes.

Not all classes are created equal. There are classes that require a ton of consistent effort to do well in. There are other classes that require virtually no effort to do well in. Noticing the difference between these classes can save you a ton of trouble.

Part of this difference is related to the teachers and their grading policies. That is a part that will consistently make a difference in your decision making. Ideally though, you should be avoiding classes where the teacher and grading policies are difficult before ever signing up for it.

Another part of this difference is in the particular subject of the class. Sure... personal preferences are a factor but when it comes to certain individual classes, the vast majority of students will end up struggling to feel confident. You can put even the best students in an advanced math class or maybe an advanced A&P class and you're bound to see them sweat a little.

It would be ridiculous to invest time in a basic course, that you could score comfortably high in with no

studying, when there is another class that you're going to be struggling to keep up in. Typically, you need to save your time and energy for the most challenging courses you have to get through.

Class prioritization has many other factors to keep track of. Depending on your goals, you should have a different focus of your energy.

College students just looking to pass their classes comfortably should invest their extra time in their most difficult courses. If they are, on the other hand, looking to prepare for a career after college, then it might be best for them to focus their energy on courses related to the career they're going to pursue. (Medical students should invest their energy in classes related to practicing medicine.)

In high school, it's a little bit different. If the high schooler is looking to get into a good college then they need to be strategizing to get their grades as consistently high as possible. That means it may come down to a balance between the classes that leads to the highest GPA. It may also mean they aim to keep all their grades at one particular level. (Colleges often judge good students by their lowest grades.)

All of this should be considered with the actual prioritization of that student's non-academic life. There is no reason for a student that's not interested in

perfect grades to be investing a ridiculous amount of their energy into their difficult classes. It's a much better use of their energy to prioritize whatever they actually care about.

This decision ultimately becomes a personal strategic decision. It should depend on your own particular goals. If you fail to keep track of the prioritization of your classes then you can end up wasting a significant amount of time on stuff that you later realize was pointless.

21. High Value Work

The more work you have, the less each piece of work is worth. This is an idea that tends to get lost in the day to day grind of school. It's one of those realizations that most students don't come to but changes everything.

Getting high scores in classes usually doesn't rely on the student's average assignment grade. In some classes a student can get low grades on the vast majority of their work while still getting an A on their final report card. The opposite point is the one that really stings most students. A student can also get high grades on most of their work while still scoring low on their final report card.

The work a student hands in is not evenly weighted. In general, you can expect homework and class work to be worth very little, essays, long assignments and tests to be worth a lot. If a student were to spend their energy intelligently, they would spend the majority of their time on that work that has a high value for their class.

The grading value of this strategy is simple. It's better to get a perfect score on something worth 5% of your final grade than to get a perfect score on something worth only 1% of your final grade. The assignment

that's worth 5% of your grade would give you 5 times the points on your final grade.

In fact, with those same assignment weightings, it's better to get a 50% on the assignment worth 5% of your grade than it is to get a perfect score on the assignment worth 1%. That is, of course, assuming you had to pick one or the other. Ideally, that scenario won't come up too often.

The first way to see this is in the general weighted of the classwork listed on the syllabus. That point was already expanded on in the syllabus section.

The second aspect is what might need a little explanation. That's a point I was hinting at in the beginning of this section.

If your teacher is making essays and homework both 20% of your final grade (to clarify: together 40%) then it doesn't mean you should weigh these two categories equally in your prioritization. It depends heavily on the quantity of assignments in both categories.

If you knew that there would be 20 homework assignments through the semester and 4 essays then you could do a very similar comparison to the one done before. 20% divided by 4 essays means each essay would be worth 5% of your final grade. 20% divided by 20 homework assignments means each

homework assignment is only worth 1% of your final grade.

As your prioritizing high value work, you also need to consider the amount of time it takes for each assignment. If an essay were to take exactly 5 times as long as the average homework assignment then it would matter. If the essay were to take half the time of 5 homework assignments then it means you're getting twice the points in half the time. It can also be the other way around with homework being twice as valuable if 5 homework assignments took half the time.

When you're calculating these times, you should make sure to include the time you're "preparing" to work. It takes time to start the first line of an essay. Some students sit there for an hour thinking about it. It also takes time to dig your homework out of your bag and get the discipline to focus enough to start. This will come down to what you're most skilled at.

Learn to focus on your high value work and you can quickly improve your grades without improving anything else.

22. Limit “Ungraded Work”

On the Smart Student Secrets blog, and my previous study blog, I gave some seriously controversial advice to students. I got quite a bit of backlash for it but the whole time, I was thinking I was saying something that was a bit of a given.

I said, “consider not doing some reading assignments.”

I’ve received a notable amount of hate mail over that simple statement. All through college (keep in mind, I wasn’t going to MIT or anything, just the typical university, perhaps it’s different in a more competitive environment) virtually every time I surveyed students, there was about a 50% chance someone did their reading assignment. Of that 50%, only about half of them thought they paid attention while reading it.

I figured, since the number of students that skipped reading assignments seemed so high, everyone already understood this was common practice.

Some reading assignments help. Most classes offer reading assignments that don’t help. Many teachers assign reading assignments that are pure busy work. Some teachers don’t test based on the reading assignments. Some teachers don’t offer any incentive

beyond the student's own pleasure, to complete the reading assignment. (Of course, sometimes they do offer incentives to read. When they do, it's obviously worth considering the incentives value just like any other assignment.)

Here is the question: If doing your reading assignment doesn't improve your grade (or has only a tiny improvement on your grade) then why should you be investing your energy on it? If your answer is, "because I enjoy it." then good for you and keep doing what you're doing.

Reading assignments aren't the only "ungraded" work that teachers give their students. They just happen to be one common example. This concept applies to everything that takes a student's energy away from their valuable assignments. Don't think about this as giving away a free chance to learn something. This is more like stealing time from things that can actually improve your grade (while, ideally, learning something.)

All of this needs to be considered with future testing in the back of your mind.

An ungraded assignment may have no immediate impact on your grade but if there is some good reason to believe it's going to be tested then it will have an impact on your grade that should be considered.

If it's a subject that you already are familiar with then perhaps it's worth skipping. If it's something you need to keep working on then maybe that's a good chance to work on it. That being said, don't assume that something is going to be tested if the teacher has already shown a counter example.

Wasted energy is often worse than losing a couple points on a curveball from the teacher. Wasted energy stacks to change your grade in every class. Losing a couple points only impacts that one class.

You may also consider super low impact work as ungraded. For example, if 10% of your grade is homework and there were 100 homework assignments through the semester, skipping a good chunk of those assignments would barely harm your grade. You should probably put some effort into some of them but it's almost ridiculous to worry about missing a few of them.

23. Cyclical Focus

Balance is complicated.

It's easy to get caught up trying to find the perfect balance between the energy you're investing in each one of your classes. No matter how perfectly you try and balance the different classes, something will always come up to throw that balance off again.

Despite that challenge, most people are looking for balance because it's just so darn comfortable. No one likes seeing their grades bouncing up and down unpredictably. Most students would rather consistent B's than inconsistent A's and C's. Every time they see a lower fluctuation of their grade they feel a little sting that isn't made up for by the extra pleasure of seeing the A.

A class may take virtually no time or energy to keep up on early in the semester but as the semester moves forward the workload and challenge can increase dramatically. Then, just as fast as it increased in difficulty, it can immediately drop off on difficulty again. The amount of challenge for any particular class can't be predicted with any certainty.

Attempting to find balance between your classes in the traditional sense is difficult for that reason.

The average student has at least 5 different classes that they're trying to keep track of. At any one time, at least one of those classes is going to be giving the student a challenge. It can be demotivating to finally feel like you're getting a grip on your work just to lose it when a new variable comes into the equation and it throws that balance off again.

Maintaining that balance becomes a bit of a full time job. You have to watch your workload in each class and constantly tweak to try and invest your energy just where you need it, just when you need it. This is a goal that's almost always followed by failure to some extent or another.

This idea of balance can be comforting but it's also very restrictive. It requires maintenance that isn't always worth the smoother ride of that balance. It ends up making every point you get more difficult because it requires a constant extra layer of internal bureaucracy.

Instead of worrying about balancing your priorities, worry about cycling your priorities. When you start to realize that a class is going to require more of your attention, don't just sneak a little time out of your other subjects to add a tiny bit of time into the subject that needs it, instead move everything but the minimum amount of time into the subject that needs it.

This strategy leads to grade fluctuations throughout the semester but those grade fluctuations serve as the perfect signal to maintain balance. By the end of the class your grade average will still be higher. You don't need to worry about managing it too closely because you can judge when a class requires more attention by what your grades are.

The Essentials

Making the decision to put less or no emphasis on studying isn't about being lazy. Sure... it can save you a whole lot of time you're wasting. The vast majority of students waste significant amounts of their time studying in completely unproductive ways.

Sometimes students study to the point that it becomes counter productive. Sure... it's good to study for a reasonable amount of time but there are dangers to studying too much. Students that end up spending 3 hours studying often get in the habit of "studying" while hardly focusing at all on their study material. They're sitting with their study material and listening to music while occasionally reading something. The next time they study, even if they are planning a short session, they're going to fall out of focus faster because that kind of studying becomes habitual. They'd often be better off to have a shorter study routine that they could stay focused more consistently through.

This is a scenario where reducing your study time isn't lazy. It's just plain old good decision making.

If the student isn't studying excessively then reducing studying becomes a bit of a trade off. You can't just magically maintain your grades by reducing your

studying. For every bit of time you reduce studying, you're going to have to make it up somewhere else (or lose something in your grades.) While studying tends to be time intensive, many of the alternative are more energy or focus intensive. That means you'll save time but you're rarely getting anything for free.

Studying is just one tool you have to keep your grades up. There are plenty of alternative options to studying. Each of them has their own benefits and costs. Many of these are tools that you probably already focus on today to some extent or another. They're often just unspoken.

If you're giving up on studying then you need to make sure the other aspects of your class are getting managed well. By investing a little bit of energy into these areas, you can make sure that, despite the smaller time investment, you're still boosting your grades consistently. At the very least, you need to make sure that reducing your study time isn't an excuse for you to slack in one of the areas that you're typically careful about managing.

This section is all about managing those other important areas of your grade.

You may already manage some of these aspects of your grade. It may be worth investing your time in these sections anyway because I've included some unique twists that can help separate the real priorities

for each one of these aspects.

Some of you reading this may be introduced to some ideas that you haven't already been managing. These ideas are being brought up because they're typically more efficient to worry about than studying.

Given the choice between studying and following through with these aspects, I'd usually recommend these methods. My point is that they're very powerful. If you're not already doing something then these ideas are important to try and learn to implement. The better you implement these ideas, the less you're going to have to worry about less efficient methods of improving your grades like studying.

24. Do Essential Work!

There is plenty of work that can be skipped in most classes.

Sure... skipping work is going to cost you points. At times, those points might be worth giving up. If you're given the choice between staying up late to complete an assignment or losing less than a half a point on your final grade, I think you'd be crazy to stay up late. I can understand if you're a little more queasy about that option but my next point shouldn't be all that tough to agree with..

There is some work that should NEVER be skipped for most classes.

Virtually all teachers create a few high priority assignments that have a notable impact on your final grade. Using the ideas I presented earlier, you'll regularly find assignments worth at least 5 points on your final grade. (To help clarify: In a class where essays are 25% of your final grade and there are only 5 essays through the class, each essay, typically, will be worth 5% of your final grade.) These assignments can become the difference between good grades and great grades. It could take hours of other assignments to make up for the points you lose on these assignments. These assignments should be

considered essential work.

This idea is in contrast to the traditional idea of “do your work.” Students that do all their work (and show up) virtually never fail classes. That is not because they do all their work though. Doing all their work certainly helps. They have no zeros to way down their high scores but it’s usually possible to still score high in a class with a handful of zeros.

The reasons students that do all their work tend to pass is because they unintentionally end up doing all their essential work as well.

Whether or not it’s worth doing all your work is up to you. Doing all your work will help your grade but don’t lose sight of the fact that most of your grade is coming from only a handful of particular assignments.

If you don’t want to skip your unessential work (which I think is usually the better decision) then consider speeding through low impact work. Most assignments can be partially done with a quick run through. You’ll often find assignments that you can get a B on while just doing the easy questions. If you find one assignment that you can do this to, you’ll often find more of them in the class.

If you’re in the kind of class that consistently gives tougher homework assignments then you might be happy to just turn that zero into a 50. That might

sound bad but assuming it's a low priority assignment (that isn't worth more than a small fraction of a percent of your grade) then it's hardly worth doing in the first place. The easy 50 is a dramatically better use of your time when the alternative is stressing over a higher grade. (This is assuming you understand the material and it's just time consuming. If you still have something to learn then you should probably be completing it.)

You don't need to do all your work but you need to make sure you complete the essential assignments.

25. Stay Consistent

Scientific experiments cannot be run with unconscious inconsistency.

Scientific experiments control for as many variables as possible. A variable like consistency to a plan is absolutely fundamental because, without it, virtually every other measured factor becomes completely useless. Any deviation from the controlled environment ruins any attempt to actually learn something from the experiment.

That is what you need to keep in mind as you're eliminating studying from your study routine. It doesn't matter how carefully you watch your grades, those fluctuations will mean nothing until you can tell how your study routine is involved in those fluctuations. You can only figure that out with any certainty if you're being consistent about the way you're studying.

If, for example, you reduce your study time the day before one test, and then see a lower than average grade on that single test, then it's virtually impossible to link that result to the decision to reduce your study time. If you, on the other hand, consistently study less for a few weeks and notice a few test scores dropping then you have a plausible signal that something in your routine needs to change.

This is particularly important in the opposite direction as well. If you're seeing your grades go up, you can't be sure something is related to that increase without a routine consistently showing that result. You may have just had an easy test. It could have just been a lucky day.

Consistency makes sure the long term impact has time to come out. Most students habitually don't pay attention in class. Just deciding one day that you want to start paying attention to allow yourself to study less isn't going to work unless you can make that focus daily and habitual.

There are times in class when you won't have to be aiming for 100% focus. That being said, staying focused anyway helps keep yourself in the habit of a consistent focus. The more consistent you can get yourself to be, the less you're going to have to worry about that consistency unintentionally working against you.

It is virtually impossible to consistently keep up your grades if you're bouncing your routine around too much. Every time you try and change your routine it requires your brain to reassess everything and fall into a different set of grooves. Falling into a different set of grooves is useful at times but every time you do it, you're putting yourself in a very stressful position. It's something that should be done intentionally and

carefully.

Consistency makes things easy. It turns the necessary but unpleasant tasks into habits that feel like they're getting done without the stress of forcing yourself to suffer through them. It makes everything you end up doing measurable. That means you're always in a good position to make a reasonable assessment of how your current strategy is working out for you.

Consistency allows for inconsistencies that you intentionally introduce into your routine to become personal experiments that can dramatically improve your grades based on strategies that work most effectively for you.

26. Read Your Mistakes

“Where are your teachers markups?” I asked the student.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I remember it. It was an 82.”

I laughed once I heard this. In hindsight, I realized how rude that might of been but this student just helped me realize a distinction that I’d had the pleasure of seeing tons but had never noticed until that moment. I told him a story.

I said, “A few weeks ago a student was messaging me about a grade he got in a paper he had to do for biology. He was the kind of student that always got all hung up on an A- because he was always pushing for the A+. When he was describing a grade he was disappointed about, he was able to list the 7 mistakes his teacher marked him up for in detail.”

The best students tend to pay attention to their mistakes. Average students tend to pack away their papers and forget about them. When a teacher hands back an assignment with a few red marks on it, they are offering the student the chance to actually improve their grade in the future.

Sure... that question may never come up again but it may. If it does, paying attention now will increase your points. If that question doesn't come up again then you're at least going to learn a little about the way your teacher grades this kind of a question.

After I started to describe that idea to the student I was talking to he seemed to get a little down. I asked him what was on his mind (even though, to be honest, I was pretty sure I knew.)

"I just hate looking at where I (explicative) up," he said.

"Imagine how your teacher feels the second time they mark you up for the same mistake," I responded before expanding on that idea. When a teacher sees that you don't actually pay attention to your mistakes, the teacher changes their perception of you. You instantly knock yourself out of the category of students that the teacher gives a top notch grade.

Great students make mistakes too. What turns them into a great student is their willingness to suck up the pain and do what it takes to learn from them.

No one likes realizing where they screwed up. It is definitely easier in the short term to live in ignorance but there is more to life than making your life easier. By making the decision to suffer in the short term you can make your long term red marks dramatically

easier to suffer through (because there will be so many fewer of them.)

This isn't only good advice for school. You can usually tell how well someone is going to do in life, not by their intelligence or skill but their stubbornness forcing them to get back up, learn from their mistakes, and try it again a little differently.

Or, if you need another way to think about it: red marks are a good thing. The more red marks you see, the more opportunities you're getting to learn from your mistakes. While some other students may be skating by and wasting their time learning almost nothing, you're getting the chance to get better and stronger.

27. Not Disorganized

Organization is a very good thing but not for the reason most people think.

Organization has the reputation for being a bit “OCD” about the details. People that tend to be organized are thought to have folders with labels, and specially organized binders and systems. Maybe they even use a planner to write everything they need to do down.

All these tools that are meant to improve your organization have value in certain situations. There are plenty of times you’ll be glad you kept all your stuff neatly organized. You may need something and find it within seconds of starting to look for it. That can feel pretty darn rewarding. In my experience, it isn’t exactly necessary though.

Great students aren’t always organized in the traditional sense. You’ll regularly find high scoring students with super basic systems of “organization” (if you dare call it that.) They might throw immediately required papers in one spot and old papers in another spot. They may skip out on keeping a written schedule.

The reality is: most of school (in most school’s) isn’t that complicated. You don’t need to archive hundreds

of papers in perfect chronological order. You don't need to write down the two or three things you need to do every night. You don't need to convince anyone that you have some unbreakable organization system. You only need to work out a few specific details to do well in school.

You need to know where to find the stuff you need to do. This can be done through the traditional organization system but it's a tad bit excessive. It can be done by just packing your homework into your textbook (or a folder to keep the edges nicer.) It can be done by keeping them in the front pocket of a binder. It can be done in a countless simple ways.

You need to know where to find important resources for you class. These important resources should include a class syllabus, papers helping you prepare for tests, and maybe an archive of older work you've done. Again, it can be done with complex tab systems but it's hardly worth it when you consider the amount of time it takes.

Perfectly organizing your stuff may look nice and help you find a paper 30 seconds faster once or twice a week but it can take a huge amount of time. In my attempts to start maintaining complex organization systems I've spent hours prepping them and I regularly spent the night keeping them in order. They may look pretty but it rarely provided an actually benefit for my grade. This is a great example of

“ungraded” work that I discussed earlier in this book.

If you enjoy spending the time doing that kind of organization or it's a graded part of your course then it could be worth doing. If you're like most students, it may be an area worth keeping simple.

The basic idea is this: Being organized rarely scores you extra points but being disorganized can cost points consistently. Don't worry if you're not perfectly organized but make sure you're not letting your organization become a problem.

28. Excessive Strengthens Knowledge

When you're reducing your study time, there is a new tool that you should introduce into your classroom repertoire.

Studying is not absolutely required for learning the information involved in most classes. By using the tools in this book, you should be able to sufficiently master the majority of the information you're taught directly during class. Assuming the test is within a day or two after the class, studying is almost pointless. Assuming the test isn't coming soon after the lesson, there is some value in reviewing the information.

Studying is good for reviewing the information that you already know. People don't learn something and then remember it forever very often. Most of the time people have to learn something and review it a number of times before it sticks with them consistently (for a limited time. Eventually, if you're not reviewing it, you'll probably forget it.)

One way to reduce the need to review information through studying is to intentionally review that information while you're completing required assignments for class.

When a teacher asks an open ended question like,

“Why do you think...” or a semi-open ended question like “How does ... work,” you’re given an open invitation to volunteer extra information. While studying can be a way to review information, making a habit of answering these kinds of questions with excessive information can help review the information as well.

If you’re asked an essay question like “What caused the civil war?” You could end up listing only one or two main factors and get full credit on the question. That, on the other hand, won’t help you reduce your need for studying in the future. That will just help reinforce the information you’re already familiar with.

Instead, consider listing every reason that you can remember and incorporate them into your answer as well. In most cases, giving a few too many answers (as long as they’re accurate) won’t do you any harm. At the very least, use that question as an opportunity to think about more than the required minimum.

The reason this strategy works well is because it’s using actual work from your class as a information review reminder. When a point is important for the future tests, it’s likely you’re going to run into a few questions about it before the actual test shows up. Every time you stop to think about a question related to that subject, you’re getting a chance to review information that’s very likely to be important.

Over time this strategy becomes a bit of a habit. Once you get yourself digging for more and more thorough answers you'll find yourself reviewing even the most obscure aspects of your material multiple times before the test.

This method certainly isn't perfect for running into every bit of information worth reviewing for your test but studying isn't all that much better for most students either. Most students lack a good mechanism to focus their studying on only the information most likely to be tested. This method is all about consistently reviewing only the information that the teacher finds most important.

Taking The Free Points

“So... do you study?” I asked him.

He shrugged and said, “not really.”

“Are you lying to me?” I asked him with a smile on my face.

He laughed “no. seriously.”

I was speaking to him about his grades. I'd recently found out that he had some of the top grades in his high school class despite having a reputation for being a bit of a slacker. I was a year ahead of him and I wanted to get to the bottom of his story. I thought I had to be missing something. I asked another clarifying question before he continued and said (excluding some choice curse words that he enjoyed using,) “It's simple. You know... like the first 70 points are free... and then...”

He continued talking at that point but within his second sentence I'd already gotten hung up on what he said. I was thinking ‘the first 70 points are free?’

Eventually he clarified this idea to me.

He estimated that about 70% of points in the average

class didn't require much work to finish. They were essentially giveaway assignments. For example, 70% of the test is filled with easy questions that the slightest bit of focus could answer within a few seconds. 70% of homework is super easy.

I disagree with such a high percentage. 70% still seems a little bit high to me. Part of me is convinced this guy was particularly gifted. From some of the other lessons I learned from him in the future, I wouldn't rule that out. That may be the reason he considered such a high percentage of his grade to come from giveaway points.

A more reasonable percentage would be somewhere between 10-50% depending on the class and what you consider free points. I tend to expect closer to 10% of points being free and another 30-40% of them being nearly free. That may be because I categorize free only as points that you earn through just showing up and putting a minimal effort in.

Despite that 70% estimate seeming high, there is some truth to the idea of free points.

A notable chunk of assignments, tests, and everything else related to your grades are virtually giveaway points. As long as you produce something it's going to give you most of the points for doing it well. The simple act of paying attention to these ideas can earn you these points. These are points that shouldn't be

thrown away.

For every easy point you waste the chance of earning, you're forcing yourself to earn the point through a more difficult question in the future. You may save a few seconds now but it could end up costing you minutes in the future. This time can start to add up into a serious wastes of time over a whole semester.

There is rarely a good reason to make your life more difficult. By investing the time to get the easy points now, you'll get the opportunity to get ahead when/if the class gets a little bit more difficult.

29. Easy Assignments

If you can complete a homework assignment within two minutes of your class ending, you're probably looking at an easy assignment.

A certain style of teaching seems to develop super simple homework assignments designed solely to help the student review the information. While some teachers go out of their way to challenge you or help you learn something new, many teachers are just looking to make you go over the information that you already know. In most cases, this leads them to developing a constant stream of easy assignments for their students.

When you find a teacher that tends to give these kinds of assignments you should assess an approximate value of each assignment as described earlier in this book. If those assignments are worth any notable amount of points to your final grade then you should be spending a few minutes to milk those easy assignments for all their points.

Have you ever heard the idea of extraordinarily smart students scoring low in class because they tend to get bored and distracted?

These easy assignments are a prime example of the

kind of work that extraordinarily smart people hate to have to suffer through. When an assignment is filled with questions that don't require any thinking to answer, it gets plain old boring. There is no fun involved with that. So... those students end up saving their energy for the kinds of questions that actually challenge them all while throwing away the points that were virtually already handed to them.

Here is my advice to anyone that's stuck in that position of getting bored:

If you're bored then you're not doing it fast enough. Even simple questions are difficult if you're pushing yourself to answer them quickly. If you put 20 or 30 easy questions back to back then answering them all as fast as you possibly can will not get boring.

The challenge doesn't have to come from the questions being asked. The challenge can also come from the way those questions are answered. Answering the questions quicker can increase the difficulty dramatically. There are other ways to increase the challenge of answering the questions too though.

One way was discussed not that long ago. The more you force yourself to expand on the answer of a question, the more difficult answering that question becomes. Think about the question I went over earlier, "What caused the American civil war?" There are the

obvious immediate answers but could you go back and think about it differently. The American civil war would have never happened if it weren't for the American revolution. Could distinctive differences from that period have made the war inevitable? What about before that period?

You don't have to write any of this down. You just need to let your brain wander into these kinds of questions instead of forcing the information into a box.

And... this general idea is coming back to an idea you may have already heard. Things aren't boring. People are boring. If you're getting bored with your assignments then you're choosing to let yourself get bored with your assignments. Plenty of dumb people get bored with challenging things too. Boredom is a choice.

Choose to make easy assignments worth doing and they'll be worth doing.

30. Questions That Answer Themselves

A certain percentage of questions the average teacher asks don't require any knowledge or experience on the subject to answer. Often, having even a basic idea about a subject can turn multiple choice questions into this style of question. For one of several reasons, the teacher made the question more about critical reading than about knowledge on the subject. There are a few different ways this can happen.

One common example of this kind of question comes from reading multiple questions on the same assignment carefully. The teacher might ask one question that can be answered by reading a separate question. When the student is watching out for this kind of thing, the points don't require any depth of knowledge on the subject matter. Even the most basic knowledge will answer it.

For example, the teacher might ask the multiple choice question, "What year did the American Civil War start?" and it might offer the answers "1865, 1861, 1874, or 1857." Let's say you're completely stumped and put off that question until later. Later on the test you might find the question, "After the 1859 election of Abraham Lincoln, which state seceded?"

Without even knowing the answer to the second question you can pretty quickly narrow down the potential answers to the previous question. Since Lincoln was the president that declared the American civil war, you can instantly rule out 1857. If you have any idea about American history then you can rule out 1874 too. (A president has never stayed in office that long.) If you happened to know the first secession occurred soon after his election and that the civil war wasn't long after that then this question is completely answered.

In long tests you'll, occasionally, find blatantly answered questions that the teachers probably failed to notice as they were creating the test. The same question about when the the civil war started, occasionally you'd find a question starting with, "In 1861 when the last state of the confederacy seceded..."

That is, of course, a rare finding but through critically reading the questions you'll run into them without even looking specifically for them. You might as well take these free points when you can get them.

Most of the questions that answer themselves that you'll run into will have their own unique style to them. That's because teachers go out of their way not to create these kinds of questions.

They don't want to be giving free points away so they

look out for all of the obvious kinds of free points. You'll usually end up noticing these little quirks based on the unique aspects of the particular question. The only way you'll ever notice those aspects is if you make reading the questions carefully a necessity.

Speeding through a test is good but if you run into a question that slows you down at all, take the time to fully understand what the question is asking. Even if you're pretty sure you don't know the answer, just understanding the question will help you find clues to the correct answer later in the test. Sometimes a few simple clues are all that you need to find the right answer.

Imagine a test asking the question "Why did Romeo drink the poison?" and an earlier question, "What made Romeo think Juliet was dead?" Anyone with the slightest idea that Romeo and Juliet was a love story might come to realize thinking that lover was dead might lead them to drink the poison. Sometimes when you make guesses like that based on the clues you'll be wrong. Then again, if you didn't know the answer in the first place, a small clue like that can dramatically improve the odds of you guessing it right.

Read every question and look for the points that the teacher is virtually giving away.

31. Teacher Emphasis

Assume you're a teacher that has to prepare students for an upcoming test. What's the most effective way you can help improve your student's scores without directly cheating by giving them the answers or simplifying the test into something that wouldn't prepare the students for future standardized testing?

The answer most teachers come to is almost cheating. They're nearly giving the students the answers to all the questions.

Before a test, most teachers are dying to tell the students in their class all the dirty little secrets that they need to know. Students may be required to keep the actual questions secret but they will hand over virtually every bit of information that you need to answer those questions in most cases.

One of the most obvious ways a teacher does this is through emphasis during their lectures. They're going to spend the most time on the information most important for answering the questions on the test (unless directed otherwise by student's questions.) If a teacher is voluntarily spending a significant amount of time on a subject then it's a subject that you should be focusing on mastering.

Another obvious way a teacher does this is through the questions the teacher asks on assignments. This is particularly true if the teacher is writing the assignment themselves. This is less true if the teacher is taking the assignment directly out of the textbook.

32. Correction Bonuses

There is one opportunity that you might run into once in awhile. It's a rare opportunity but when you stumble into it, it can virtually always boost your grade with very little effort going in.

After you get your work back from your teacher with your grade on it, some teachers offer students the chance to correct their mistakes for some amount of partial credit. So you may have received an 80 on it but that 80 isn't finalized. If the teacher offered you half credit on anything you correct then you could just correct your mistakes and bring it up to a not-so-shabby 90.

When a teacher hands you an opportunity like this it's kind of like they're lobbing a fastball right over the middle of the plate. If you don't knock it out of the park then you might as well not be playing.

Most of the time you'll get a list of red marks on your paper directly from your teacher. If you were to pick up that list of red marks and correct only those problems then you'd be earning points for a simple transcription task. It's one of the easiest ways you can possibly get points for a class. Even for low value work, it's usually worth picking up these free points.

As long as the process doesn't stress you out too much, you should be doing it.

I've heard teacher's give a few different explanations for this kind of a policy. I've heard explanations about how real life requires corrections. So... if you were writing a report at work, it's likely someone else would review that document and give you some feedback where you need to correct it. This is a plausible idea.

I've also heard a couple teachers say this is a policy they use to help students that struggle. The policy makes it so students are encouraged to review their mistakes and learn from them. The more a student struggles, the more they have to gain from this process.

For example, a D student may be able to bring their grade up a lot while an A student would only be able to improve it a little. (After hearing that I had to wonder if it wasn't quite so wonderful because, from my experience, it's the A students that would actually fight for those extra points when they don't really need it. The D student is usually willing to settle.)

One day I heard one teacher give an explanation that astonished me. In that moment, I started to wonder if it was the secret reason that other teachers had for this policy. She said, "It helps me figure out who cares." She was saying that students that care should be able to improve their grade.

If there is one thing a policy like this helps a teacher do, it can help the teacher find the students that care. As a student, you want to look like a student who cares. When the student cares, the teacher cares. (Teachers don't mind giving C's to C students. C students don't complain. Teachers don't like giving C's to A students. A students complain.)

While your participation in these policies should come down to specific policy information, it's almost always worth putting in the effort just to show the teacher that you're putting in an effort for the class. While most students might settle for whatever grade they got, you can show the teacher that you are willing to put the extra effort in for more points.

When you show the teacher that kind of an effort, they're going to start looking for excuses to improve your grade on their own.

33. Follow Directions

This should go without saying but it's surprisingly unusual for a large percentage of students. I was one of those students growing up.

When I saw a problem that I was confident I could answer, I would skip anything that looked like it wasn't required to answer the question. At the start of a list of questions, I would skip the actual directions and just move onto answering the questions.

In reality, this is rarely a problem.

It doesn't take all that much experience to learn that you need to circle one answer for multiple choice questions or write in a word to fill in the blank. Most questions are pretty self explanatory. Common sense can guide you a pretty good percentage of the time.

A small percentage of the time, this will bite you. When it does end up biting you, there is a chance that it can bite you very badly.

Every once in awhile the teacher may try to throw you for a loop. The teacher might intentionally try to catch students that aren't paying attention to the directions and add some explicitly silly direction in the directions like, a common one I've seen, "don't answer question

x.”

Those questions are essentially just “gotcha’s” that teachers try to use to force their students into reading the directions to their test. I find them particularly irritating because, if following directions is so important, you’re bound to lose points for not doing it anyway.

Fortunately, that, is a rare occasion. A more likely scenario is that the teacher goes on to offer slightly unusual directions to a rather typical looking scenario.

The questions may be all multiple choice questions but the teacher might write in something like “Circle all correct answers.” Instead of just having one potential answer, you’re forced to consider the possibility that there are multiple correct answers. If you’re rushing through the question and don’t know this, you might just end up circling the first right answer you see and move on without checking out the remaining answers.

There is a worse scenario for most students though.

With this kind of a question, a student could easily get hung up for 5 or 10 minutes trying to pick between two different answers that the student thinks could be right. If the student is concerned with only selecting one of those answers, they can end up driving themselves into curled up balls of stress before the end of the test.

At times, a set of directions will end up giving you clues to the answer to the questions you're going to have to answer. This is often the case with questions that the teacher obviously wrote for a very specific set of questions in their class.

When you're given directions for a long assignment like a science report or an essay, you have to treat the directions even more carefully. While you may have a little leeway in the way your teacher grades you, you shouldn't risk riding too far off the rails or you could end up losing a big old chunk of points from an assignment that's important for your final grade.

Sometimes, failing to read a set of directions can end up costing you on every single question in a section of a test. On those rare occasions you can lose so many points for simple little things that you'll feel completely foolish.

Following directions is pretty basic but it can easily get overlooked when you're going through the day to day grind of school. Take the time to carefully read the directions when you have to complete an assignment. It may not seem worth it but those little points add up and you'll definitely wish you had when it ends up costing you a lot of points.

Taking The Multiplier Points

While looking for the free points in class can be lucrative (and not too time consuming,) they're not the easiest opportunities to find. You'll notice most of the teachers that give lots of free point opportunities tend to do it regularly. A good percentage of teachers will snuff out any intentional opportunities they find for free points.

Free points are good but I tend to prefer what I call, multiplier points.

Multiplier points are just what they sound like. They're points that are worth more than the initial points on any particular assignment.

I prefer these points for a number of reasons. The first and most important reason is because you will find them in almost every class you take. This isn't just an occasional opportunity you can exploit, it's taking advantage of the system that exists. It's learning the tricks that are inherent with any classroom that you'll participate in.

The second and slightly less important reason I prefer multiplier points is that you actually learn something. Picking up free points is entertaining. It feels good to get something for almost no effort. It's kind of like

picking up pennies off the ground. You might end up thinking, “Hey! I’m a penny richer.”

Of course, the amount of energy and time it took for you to bend over and pick up that penny can be calculated into that assumption that you’re rich. Assuming you found a penny every ten steps you take you’d probably make more just getting a job like a regular schlub. When you’re picking up free points, you’re not even guaranteed to run into them every ten feet.

Looking for multiplier points is kind of like passing up the pennies on the ground and looking for a job that actually pays you well. You should still pick up the pennies but the bulk of your money is going to come from multiplier points.

Without further ado, multiplier points are points that will earn you multiples of the points you earn from original assignment. While doing the work right now will earn you a small chunk of points, having done that assignment, you’ll be able to use that knowledge and stress to earn you more important points in the future.

Some assignments are essentially just busy work from the teacher. Naturally, the teacher usually has good intentions of helping you learn something but when it comes test time, or later in the semester, the ideas you learned from those assignments will never come up again. They just earn you the points they’re

worth. They provide no long term value beyond that.

Other assignments are teaching you the foundations of the class. They help you learn information that's going to be brought up again and again. The assignments may provide only a small amount of points now but throughout the semester, you're going to need to know the information so many times, that small amount of points is going to multiply into something much more valuable for you.

Once you earn those multiplier points, you still have to show up later to collect them but they give you the opportunity to make earning those points significantly more simple. One of the only real challenges to taking advantage of this is knowing how to find what work will offer you the benefits and which won't.

34. Prime Time For Test Prep Assignments

Find the assignments most likely to prepare you for future tests and assignments. It is a tricky process that it takes experience to get just right but the value is huge.

The first way to distinguish the assignments that are most likely to provide a long term benefit is to judge how related that assignment's lessons are to the base knowledge required for the class. This is a process that can benefit from looking at the syllabus and every other clue the teacher gives you about the direction the course is going. The details of this process will be discussed more in detail through the next session. In the meantime, there are some other clues that can be used to make this decisions on the fly as you're getting the work from the teacher.

When you're making these decisions you're going to have to get into the mind of your teacher. Teachers like to teach their students as much information as possible. That being said, teachers are required to teach their students certain information. Teachers will almost always make required work a priority when they're forced to pick.

With that in mind, you can almost guarantee, if you're late in the semester and there were a half a dozen

classes the teacher missed through the semester, your teacher is going to be tossing out every assignment that isn't related to the test. That can make your life a little easier because you know virtually everything has some value in learning. Of course, it comes with the challenge of having missed the chance to have more time to learn it.

The earlier you are in the semester, the more likely your teacher will be handing out tangential work that's not vital for your future tests. This is just because there is less chance that the teacher will have fell behind by that point.

You have to watch the syllabus too. If halfway through the semester you're already two thirds of the way through the syllabus, you should start watching for extra little assignments popping up.

You can even break this kind of thinking down test by test. Most teachers have already written their tests by the start of the year. That means they're teaching to their own little deadlines. If they have a test planned, they need to teach their students a certain amount of information by each one of those tests. If the test is coming right up then the homework is more likely to be directly related to that test. If you just finished a test, the work may be less likely to be vital.

Take note that this is a strategy that's dependent on speculation. There is no way to know whether the

teacher plans to delay the test or spend a ton of the class time on a few very specific subjects. You need to use your common sense. Don't go to any extremes with your guesses.

Judge assignments by how tangential they look towards the material you're studying. If the teacher throws you an oddball assignment that seems highly unrelated to what you're learning then it could be unrelated to the coming tests and assignments. If the teacher gives you 2 or 3 more assignments related to that tangential subject then you're going to have to catch back up because, just because you see it as tangential, it doesn't mean it is.

Don't bet everything when you're digging for the assignments to spend the most time and energy on. If you start to get suspicious that you may have been wrong, consider correcting that error early (and often.) Even if you go back to do assignments you thought were unimportant, the improved focus will improve your grades in other areas and help prevent wasted energy. This evens out the risk quite a bit.

35. Base Knowledge

In the previous section I mentioned the importance of distinguishing how related the information you're learning is to the class you're taking.

For example, if you're taking an American history course, and you get an assignment discussing some minor aspect of Grover Cleveland's presidency or his family life, unless you have some reason to believe otherwise, it's safe to assume it's a bit of a tangent from what you're going to find on the test. That's because American history involves hundreds of years of events that are dramatically more interesting than poor old Grover Cleveland. Unless your teacher happens to have a thing for Grover Cleveland, it's better to focus your energy elsewhere.

When you're trying to make these decisions it may be a good idea to pull out your syllabus and look for clues to what you're going to learn through the class. Often, in some way or another, you'll get a list of the subjects that the teacher plans to go over in the course. The teacher might list a chapter by chapter analysis of the semester. This is gold for distinguishing oddball assignments from the assignments that will end up paying you multiples on the initial investment.

Sometimes teachers give information to help students prepare for upcoming tests. This information is even more powerful. If you see information being discussed on an assignment that's related to something the teacher is saying is on the test then it's a dead giveaway that it's important.

Sometimes you'll have even more resources like reading schedules or other papers that can help you make these decisions.

Your goal is to find an excuse to learn something. An excuse to learn something can come from any of these sources. If you find that excuse to learn it then it's best to play it safe and make all assignments related to it a high priority. If you really dig and fail to find an excuse to learn something and it doesn't have high priority based on points alone then you should make it a low priority assignment.

When you can't find any way that an assignment is related to the base knowledge required to do well in the course then you can't let yourself get seduced by its sirens call. You can do the assignment but you need to be vigilant to always put those assignments after assignments that have a higher value in the long term. If you were in a really tight spot (which should rarely happen) you may even want to forget about doing a higher value assignment without a relation to base knowledge in exchange for focusing your energy on a lower value assignment that is related to base

knowledge.

Making fewer points now is a problem but you have to consider the long term effect making these decisions is going to have on your grades. (Points now are less valuable than points later. Odds are, getting points is only going to get harder for you as the class rolls on. Early in the class there is just less information to be tested on.)

There is another form of multiplier points that should be the most taken advantage of opportunity of all.

36. Fun Points

Some points are multiplied in value because they help you prepare for future assignments that will increase your score even more.

Other points are multiplied in value because they actually provide you the opportunity to do something that you find entertaining. While it may or may not provide extra points for you in the future, it offers you the short term benefit of learning while enjoying yourself.

One of the biggest things to watch for while you're in class is your associations with your work. If you're going to class day after day and doing all your homework while feeling absolutely miserable, you're going to be in a constant struggle to get and keep your grades up. The way you think about class decides how easy it is going to be to learn through it.

If you're just showing up to class because you feel like you have to, your brain is going to be looking for absolutely any excuse it can come up with to distract itself. ("Hey... look... a window... how interesting. Now you've got to stare out of it for forty minutes thinking about everything but your teacher's lecture.")

If, on the other hand, you're feeling reasonably good

about school then you're going to be able to focus without trying so hard. When the lecture gets boring you may still catch yourself zoning out but the better your mood, the more consistently you're going to get back into focus when you need it.

There is no magic formula to enjoying class. For many students, this will be their number one challenge. Not everyone is well-suited for a traditional classroom environment. That being said, our world provides benefits to the students that can get themselves through it. It can be worth it. That being said, if there were a magic formula to enjoying class, it would come down to changing a student's associations with class.

If a student thinks of class and thinks of sitting through boring teachers and lectures, with classmates they don't like, while doing work they don't care about then they're bound to suffer through class. If the student instead thinks of something they kind of enjoy about the class, even if they dislike a good chunk of it too, they're going to do better at it.

Here is how fun assignments provide a point multiplier.

If you find an assignment that you think you'll enjoy then you might just help reinforce positive associations with that class and with school in general. Those associations improve your ability in

absolutely everything you do related to the class. The effect is hard to measure because it's dispersed through everything you do but once you start milking it you'll feel the difference.

Take the time to do what you enjoy about class. Even if it's not the most valuable thing point wise, you need to find at least a little time to focus on whatever aspects of school you find most fulfilling.

Some students aren't lucky enough to consistently find assignments they enjoy (or skilled, I consider it a skill to find the enjoyable aspect of the things you don't have control over. It's the old idea of the grapes you can't reach being sour or, better yet, the grapes you can reach are some of the sweetest you've ever tasted.) If you do find these kinds of assignments then be sure to take advantage of it.

Tricks For Even More Cheap Points

37. Inherent Flaws In The System

It's impossible to create a set of rules that are immune to loopholes. When your school and it's teachers are creating the class policies, they're also creating the means to use those class policies for your own advantage.

Just look at the average olympic lifter for a pretty clear example of this. If you were creating a weightlifting competition with minimal rules, you'd have a competition that was almost completely dependent on weight. A two hundred pound lifter would have absolutely no chance of competing versus a well trained three hundred pound lifter. That would mean most of the people competing would be competing to just get more and more massive.

To prevent that from happening, competitions create weight classes. People in the 150-160 pound weight class would only compete with people around their own weight. That means, there is a little more strategy than just getting bigger and bigger. (It also means the competitions won't be filled with only the most genetically gifted. There is some room for competition.)

This basic rule has a flaw though. Lifters that happen to be on the lower end of their weight class will

struggle to compete. That means, at a certain point, instead of getting stronger, it's smarter to focus on losing a few pounds to get in the lower weight class. Despite typically being a 181 pound lifter you might shed a couple pounds right before the competition to sneak in as the strongest lifter in the 170-180 pound weight class. (These are simplified versions of weight classes but they help portray the problem.)

That can just be defined as good strategy but notice how it's no longer just a "weight lifting" competition. It suddenly becomes a weight loss competition as well. It's not always about lifting more. It's also about managing your weight. That can come with some more serious risks too.

Weight lifting competitions are flooded with contestants dehydrating themselves (or other unhealthy things) before the competition so they can sneak into a lower weight class. Before the actual competition they might just bulk back up drinking water to recover their weight. So... they can be in competition breaking the actual weight class despite it, supposedly, being prohibited.

No matter how you create a set of rules, these flaws will end up sneaking into the ruleset. It's the basic mechanism used to find most of the strategies recommended in this book. Learning to use it is one of the most effective ways to boost your grade based on whatever class policies you end up running into.

If a teacher has a generous late work policy then take advantage of it. If the teacher doesn't accept late work then consider handing in a half completed assignment to squeeze out points you'd otherwise lose forever. If a teacher lets you select your own partners for an assignment, take advantage of it.

If a teacher creates their own interesting class policies, try to figure out how you can use those class policies to your own benefit. There is always a way. You just have to be creative enough to find it.

38. How Could You Forget It?

Mnemonics are something that virtually every student should already understand.

Mnemonics are using simple letter or word tricks to remember a particular set of information. You might have heard of using “Homes” to remember the North American Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan Erie, and Superior.) Each letter in “Homes” represents the first letter of each lake. Something simple like that can help make the information dramatically harder to forget.

Using tricks like mnemonics is great for remembering more information. While you’re listening to the teacher explain any kind of list, you should be trying to find some way to make that information your teacher is telling you harder to forget. One of those ways is as simple as using a mnemonic.

The more memorable you can make the information you’re learning, the less you’ll need to worry about actually studying it. If you get good at creating these kinds of mnemonics then you will remember them without even studying them in the future.

One alternative to mnemonics is creating an amusing image in your head related to the information you’re

trying to remember. That image you're picturing doesn't have to be related to the information you're studying directly. In fact, the sillier and more unusual that information, the easier it will be to remember it.

For example, if you're trying to remember something like the "cranial fossa," (don't worry, you don't need to know what that is to remember it,) you might imagine a crane carrying an eel. Next to that you see the Lion King character Mufasa (the King of the Pride Lands) pushing a cow out of the pride lands (cows don't belong there!) After you imagine that image well once or twice, it's pretty difficult to forget. It will help you remember Crane-Eel Mufasa minus the moo. Cran-eel Fasa may lead you to spelling it wrong but with two second of thinking you can put the correct spelling together.

An image like that creates strong links throughout your brain. It connect ideas you understand with ideas you don't understand quite as well. That makes those less understood ideas easier to remember. It's also creating a memorable idea from something that you might just think about as boring.

Memorability is key when you're working on these memory tricks. Making something memorable is a game of trying to surprise yourself in the creation of these memory tricks. The more outrageous, silly, or downright dirty a memory trick is, the easier it will be to get the idea to stick. Take advantage of that and

you'll have plenty of random memories from mnemonics and images that it will take years of not thinking about to forget.

It can be challenging to develop these memories while you're directly in class and trying to keep up. This is particularly true if you're not very practiced in staying focused through the class.

Once you start getting the hang of a strong focus through class you'll find this process gets more and more natural. In time, you'll find yourself creating memory tricks without too much conscious effort.

When you come up with a particularly outrageous idea you might have to hold back laughter in class. That can be a bit embarrassing but I consider it a rather enjoyable problem to have.

39. Last Second Checkup

The following strategy may be considered studying. That being said, it mostly takes up time that would otherwise be wasted anyway.

Most of studying relies on the long term retention of information. Your goal is to put the information you're learning into someplace where you can easily locate the information in the future. Then, to make sure you don't lose the information in the piles of boxes you've got stored up in your skull. (It can get awfully messy up there.)

Most people don't struggle to remember large amounts of information in the short term. If you were looking at something five minutes ago and you knew it was important, there is a good chance you're not going to forget it, even if you don't try all that hard. If you happened to be looking at something you found interesting then you'll virtually never forget it within five minutes. It would be harder to forget it than to remember it.

This can be taken advantage of when you know you're going to need a certain set of information before class. It's particularly valuable if you know you're going to be taking a test during the class.

Right before you start a class that you're going to be taking a test, review the information that you're afraid you'll forget. That gives you the chance to remember the information from your long term memory or from your short term memory.

If you have a good idea of what information is going to be on the test then this can become your primary strategy of "studying" for a test. (Studying is in quotes because many people wouldn't define this as studying at all. There is a reasonable case to be made why it's not studying that I'll discuss in a bit.) It can dramatically improve your grades on smaller tests because you're going to get to review a large chunk of what the test is going to require you to know. On longer tests it becomes less and less valuable.

If you're really looking to remember something then, immediately after your test is started (and your books are away, naturally,) you can write what you want to remember on the margins of the test. That will make it impossible to forget when you need it later in the test.

This is a valuable short term strategy. It can instantly boost almost any grade you get. That being said, it should be taken advantage of with caution. The short term memories you create will mostly be lost after you finish the test. That means, the information you scored points with now will be lost before you're tested on the information again. That could mean you need to spend another 5 minutes reviewing the

information before the next test. Odds are, you'll have even more information to worry about.

Over time, using this strategy too much can lead to you falling behind on the information you're required to know to do well in class.

This strategy tends to be most valuable when treated as a review strategy or an emergency tight schedule situation. If you're just reviewing information you already understand then it will boost your score without the risk of not knowing the information for your next test. It also won't hurt too bad if you're just doing it once in awhile when you, for some reason or another, don't know what you should know by the test time.

Teacher Management

It's a lot easier for a student to manage one teacher than it is for a teacher to manage 20-30 (100?) students.

The way that a student manages their teachers can make or break the student's final grade. Students that know how to keep their teachers happy (even while doing very little) end up with the highest grades. There is only so much work one student can put in. There are unlimited ways that a student can improve their efficiency to dominate in their classes. Learning to deal with teachers properly is one of the most effective.

A good chunk of your grades come from the subjectivity of the teacher. Some classes ask completely objective right or wrong questions. You can expect this in math. Most classes rely heavily on subjective issues that require the teacher decide whether or not they like your answer or not.

Believe it or not, despite the hype, teachers are humans. People have tendencies to judge other people and their work based on things that really shouldn't matter. You take a smart student, dress them like a slob, throw them in the back of the classroom, and have them act like a bit of a jerk then

that student's grade will lower. The teacher will see that behavior and assume that it was based on the objective judgement of the students work when the difference is only how much the teacher dislikes him or her.

If you want to improve your grades while cutting out studying then you need to be particularly careful with the image you present to your teacher. If, through this process, you advertise to your teacher that you're trying to spend less time working or their class, the teacher is going to lower your grades whether you deserve it or not.

If you're willing to take this knowledge even farther, you can use these perceptions to improve your grades. By making the teacher think you're smarter, more committed, or just more enthusiastic then you're going to be able to push the subjective judgement of the grades you're earning up instead of down.

This sections goes over, first of all, the cautionary aspects of this factor. Minimally, you need to know how to maintain a good relationship with as many teachers as possible because they're going to change your grades based on their perception of you. Second, it goes over how to actually improve that relationship into something that can improve your grade. There is one more thing I consider even more important:

Making friends with your teachers will improve your grades more than just based on the subjectivity of the teacher. If you're able to find the good qualities of your teacher and learn to like them then this will help you focus and improve your grade. I have a theory that many students become great at a particular subject because, at one time, someone nurtured them in that subject. I don't think teachers are holier than thou bringers of genius but sometimes things just click and that really can work in the student's favor.

Keeping good relations with your teachers ensures you're always in a good position to benefit from these advantages.

40. Good Teacher Relations Basics

Don't screw it up.

That's the basic premise to focus on.

You shouldn't waste your time trying to nurture a close friendship with your teachers. Teachers have too many students to force this kind of a relationship. The more you try and push for it, the more often you'll be sorely disappointed by a teacher that ends up just trying to avoid you. There may be advantages to that but that goes well beyond the basics of dealing with teachers.

Focus on not doing things to upset your teacher. Most teachers will grow to hate you if you have one of the bad habits that happen to drive them nuts. The list of things that teachers tend to hate isn't secret.

Everyone has heard teacher's complain about these things. Don't do them or you're asking to be disliked.

When the teacher is talking, you need to keep your own mouth shut. I believe that it should be the teacher's responsibility to keep the student interested. That being said, you are just shooting yourself in the foot by talking while the teacher is talking. They won't like you. That will hurt your grades. Just because you think the teacher is boring, you're not going to

convince anyone to change anything. You're there. Assuming you can't change classes, you're stuck. Face the fact and make the best out of it.

Creating extremely messy assignments is another major pet peeve of teachers. If the teacher is struggling to read your paper then they're probably sitting and stewing about how stupid it is they have to waste their time interpreting your chicken scratch. That isn't going to help your relationship with anyone.

This should go without saying but never criticize your teacher. It doesn't matter if they deserve it or not. It's not worth the risk it creates for your grades. If you ever have anything slightly critical of your teacher then layer it under so many sugar coated layers that they may just mistake it for a compliment. Don't tell your teacher you should have got a better grade. Instead, tell them you don't quite understand why you got the grade you did and you know they must have had a good reason and you're hoping they can help you understand it. (A teacher's job isn't easy. They're grading tons of papers. They make mistakes too. There is no reason to be a jerk about it anyway.)

Don't show up late for class. This is another one of those "I don't care," statements that many students make. It's making the student look like they don't care. At the very least, it's interrupting the teacher's thought pattern while making the teacher notice you.

If you end up doing something that is rude to the teacher (or may just be perceived that way,) play it safe and give them a genuine apology. Heck... if you're good with apologies then there is a good chance the teacher will like you better after you screw up and apologize.

None of these ideas are particularly complicated. They're all based on things you should already know. You don't need to make your teachers like you to do really well in school but you certainly can't screw your relationships up too much and stay consistent. (Good luck convincing an administrator the teacher grades you low because they don't like you. That's an uphill battle you'd probably lose. Just play it safe.)

41. The Office Time Advantage

If your teacher sets up an office time where they work with their students then you should be one of the few students that take advantage of it (at least once in awhile.)

The majority of students never go to see their teacher outside of class. This isn't a major problem. A student that the teacher doesn't notice will rarely upset the teacher. They'll get graded in a reasonably fair manner. That being said, even if it hurt their grades to not go, most students still wouldn't put in the time and effort to go.

The vast majority of high school students and a slightly lesser majority in college are going because they "have to." They have to show up to class to pass their classes. They are just looking to get through it. They have no intention of putting in the extra effort unless it's absolutely required. Most teachers know this.

Showing up to office time is one way that you can tell the teacher that you're one of the few students that actually care about their grade, the subject, or just what they know. Showing that you care instantly puts you in a more positive light than the majority of students. Even if the teacher thinks you're annoying,

slow, or even a little rude, if the teacher thinks you're trying hard then they'll want to like you. (No... this isn't a good excuse to stop being polite.)

Most teachers really want to help their students. If you can make them feel like they're genuinely helping you then those teachers will do a surprising amount for you. Showing up to ask them questions is a quick and easy way to do this. When you thank them for their help that teacher is going to feel good about themselves and you. When that teacher grades a question that you were asking something about before, the teacher is going to feel good again (assuming you're right.) All these are turn into moments that improve your chances of subjectivity working in your favor.

Naturally, this should be done tastefully. The harder you try to do this, the more likely you'll just rub the teacher wrong. If you just focus on asking them for help on things that you're genuinely struggling on, and you're genuinely appreciative when they do help you then you'll be doing it right. Showing up to every office time and asking hundreds of questions could easily bite you.

Don't underestimate how powerful this factor can be in your final grade. Some teachers downright lie on their final grading to help students succeed. Most teachers just slightly boost your grade on virtually everything they can slide you extra points for. Even in

objective subjects like math, what might be half credit showing work for one student can be defined as $\frac{3}{4}$ credit for showing work by another student the teacher likes better. Wherever there is a subjective judgement there is an area for the teacher to sneak you extra points.

Showing up for office time is one of the most blatant ways you can advertise that you're one of the students that actually care.

42. The Extra Effort

Showing up to the teacher's office time isn't the only way that you can start to impress upon the teacher your own commitment to the subject or material. Creating the image of a student that cares about their grades is important enough to worry about.

Take note: Just because you DO care about your grades, it doesn't necessarily create the image of a student that cares about their grades. If you're missing classes, handing in messy work, and not looking focused in class then you're going to end up looking like the average student (or worse.) How ever much you may really care about your grade, you shouldn't waste it by making it hard for the teacher to notice. The more obvious you can make it, the better off you'll be. Teachers aren't mind readers. You need to prove it to them.

Finding ways to put the extra effort into the class are one of the best ways to create this image.

If the teacher offers occasional extra credit then use it. Even if you don't really need it. Even if it's not a particularly efficient use of your time. Even if it falls under the low priority work.

If the teacher is offering extra credit to a class full of

students then only the students that need it and the students that actually care will end up doing it. This is particularly true if you don't see many other students looking to do the extra credit. (The fewer students end up doing it, the more you doing it will stand out.)

This is less useful if the teacher offers consistent extra credit assignments that aren't an efficient use of your time. The more often these opportunities come up, the less valuable they are for you to go through with them.

Another way to show that extra effort is to never write an essay to the minimum word count. The minimum word count is not a target to reach. It's a minimum! Teachers do notice when papers are a little longer than average. That kind of noticing is a good thing for the student. It shows the student didn't just write to hit the word count. (Even if the student just add 25% to the minimum word count and made that the target.) It makes it look like the student is actually aiming to write a good paper.

Naturally, you shouldn't go to the extremes with this one because, teachers don't like wasting too much time reading their student's essays. If you end up writing double the word count then you'll probably end up irritating the teacher (unless the teacher happens to enjoy it.) If you need a target word count then typically aim for 25% higher than the minimum. That will add a sizable chunk of length compared to the

average student's paper that the teacher can notice.

Another, slightly more risky way to put in that extra effort is to communicate a little more than required with the teacher. If you end up doing something a little messier than usual than apologize before they complain and then don't make the same mistake again. If you're handing in an important assignment late then consider telling the teacher when you'll get it into them. Sometimes these communications can backfire but if you know the teacher well enough to be confident they'll help then consider using them.

Boundless Confidence

Confidence is about more than just the way you feel.

It definitely feels good to be more confident about what you're doing. That can provide some benefits in itself. When you feel better about what you're doing then you're less likely to get stressed about it. That means you'll think more logically and feel better at the end of the day about what you're doing. You're less likely to dread the next time you're stuck doing it.

The primary advantage of confidence is in how it changes the way you work and think.

It is difficult to force yourself to do things that you're not confident about consistently. It's a drain. As long as you think that tests are a major challenge for you, you're going to absolutely hate doing tests. That makes it nearly impossible that you'll ever break the cycle and get skilled at taking tests. The decision to become confident (even if it's naive and undeserved) dramatically improves the odds that you'll actually get better at it.

Most people are "bad at tests" because they end up excessively stressing themselves out over their tests. The human brain's stress mechanism is good for punching attacking sharks in the nose. It's designed to

send blood to your body and shut down the brain. Stress isn't quite as good for trying to use your brain.

When you feel good about the work you're doing you dread it less. If you feel terrible while taking tests then you're going to dread them. If you naively believe that test taking is one of your strong points, you will dread the tests a lot less. That eliminates the most common reason people consider themselves bad test takers.

Becoming confident won't necessarily "improve" your grade but it often helps keep you from accidentally decreasing it.

The secondary advantage of confidence is in how your teachers will start perceiving your work. If you're presenting yourself with large amounts of self-doubt then the teachers will unintentionally assume the doubt exists for a reason. You're going to end up fighting an uphill battle in proving that you know what you're doing.

Confidence is a subject easier discussed than done.

The more you worry that you might be lacking confidence, the more often you'll end up hurting your own confidence. It's one of those things that it's easiest to pull through indirect methods. There is an old quote on happiness falsely attributed to Henry David Thoreau that seems to describe this idea well. I feel it applies equally well to confidence.

“Happiness is Like a Butterfly, the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder...”

Instead of trying to directly chase confidence you just need to do the things that bring confidence and let it come naturally.

I think it's possible for people to condition themselves for consistent confidence but that's a long and inconsistent process that I haven't experienced. I don't have to think myself into confidence because I just go through the motions that bring confidence without worrying too much about it. It always seems that I end up confident as a result.

Confidence is key but don't get stressed about it. Instead just keep trying the keys you have and you'll find the one you need.

43. Work Fast

When people are confident about something, they move faster. When people are less confident about something, they tend to be methodical about the process.

Most of what you do in school should not be methodical. Most of what you have to do for assignments should be rather mechanical. That may seem a little strange considering how much new knowledge is getting presented to most students.

Once you get the ideas of this book in motion, you're going to learn most of what you need to learn for your assignments and tests directly in class. Once you leave the class, your teachers will end up presenting you with work that, based on the facts that you already learned should be almost mechanical.

Teacher's rarely throw their students questions that require a dramatic amount of creative problem solving. Most of the work they're presenting just requires you step through a mechanical process. Once you know how to step through that mechanical process, it becomes possible to speed up.

Class time is for learning.

The time that you're doing your assignments should be used for getting better at using those skills learned in class. Increasing your speed is a process that forces you to get better and better. The better you get at that skill the more confident you're going to feel in your ability to complete it.

When test time comes, working fast helps encourage confidence but it also helps ensure time doesn't get wasted on easy questions. There will be questions that require the student to take a dramatically longer time than typical. There is no reason that time should be spent on a question that could be answered in less time.

How fast should you be working?

The goal isn't really to work at any particular pace. The goal is to constantly be pushing yourself into a faster pace. You may naturally work a little slower than other people. As long as you're working at a pace that's slightly faster than you feel comfortable, you're getting yourself more skilled at the question.

This process is never ending because as soon as you get completely comfortable working at a particular pace, you will start letting more time for doubt and distractions to kick in. The more time you give them, the more time they will take. Insist upon always pushing the pace of your assignments to slightly faster than feels natural to you.

Working fast forces you to focus your energy where it matters (on the thing you're working on at that moment.) You don't have time to think about what you want to do after class, or about that strange thing that happened the night before, or how to best approach your crush without coming off as creepy. You're too busy moving from one process of the assignment into the next.

This is one of the most important aspects of working fast. When you're busy working on what you need to work on you end up distracting yourself from your doubts. On that note...

44. Distract Your Doubts

Working fast is kind of like skydiving. Sure... it's probably not quite as intense but it can help as a thought experiment. Imagine you're about to jump out of the plane. In that moment, you're probably not going to be thinking about what you want to eat for dinner. You're probably not going to be too concerned if your friend talked to you with a funny tone earlier (unless it was related to your parachute.) Your brain is going to be singly focused on the fact that you're about to jump out of a plane.

This should remind you of the hang glider example used earlier.

When you're working at an uncomfortably fast pace in class, you're not going to have time to worry about unrelated information. In some ways, the need not to screw up distracts you from all the other things you could easily get caught up thinking about. Distractions are one of the most powerful tools you have for managing the way you think.

Stewing in doubt is deadly to your confidence. Having an instant of doubt and fear is human. Sitting and thinking about that doubt and fear is pointless. You might have heard the phrase, "A coward dies a thousand deaths."

Think about this as referring to the fact that fearing something is almost the same thing as experiencing it. If you're worried about death then you're experiencing some of that pain. The more vividly you worry, the more of it you're experiencing. Every time that coward fears death they're suffering a part of it. If they weren't scared then they'd end up only suffering through it once.

Doubt has a purpose. Once you feel it, you may want to consider doing something to eliminate that doubt. If you're doubting your ability to do well on a test then it may be a sign you should study. If there is nothing you can do to eliminate this doubt (like it's already test time) then it has no good use anymore. It's time to do whatever you can to get your mind off of it.

Working fast is one of the most efficient methods during a test. During the few minutes before a test you should sit and focus your mind on anything but that doubt. This is a reasonable time for daydreaming about something awesome. (It may also be a chance to take advantage of last minute studying.) If it's the night before the test and you're doubting yourself, it may be a sign you should study.

Notice how it "may" be a sign you should study. Most people are not skilled in distinguishing reasonable school doubts from excessive doubts. At a certain point, you should have studied enough. Once you

know enough to get the grade you want with a reasonable level of safety net then any doubts you have are excessive.

One of the best pieces of advice I could give the average student about studying is to skip studying the night before a test. If you've studied enough in the past then you won't need it. If you do study then you might just work yourself up into fearing the test. That will have more negative consequences than the extra studying will have positive ones.

It gets a little more confusing when you're trying to eliminate a study routine completely but stressing the night before the test is not the solution. Distract yourself from the test in any way possible. If you insist upon worrying about it then at the very least, set a tight deadline for how long you're willing to spend worrying about it.

The better you learn to control your doubts, the less often they'll get in the way. One of the best ways to control your doubts is to just learn to distract yourself when they're on longer productive.

45. Tinker. Don't Engineer.

Putting things together right the first time is difficult.

When you have a major project or problem put in front of you, if you're worried about completing it then you're likely to run yourself into a bit of a wall.

Completing large projects can be downright intimidating. If you intend to do it the right way then you get caught up in bit of a rut worrying about it. Since there are so many aspects of the project or problem you need to keep track of, you end up struggling to keep track of any of it.

This becomes an even bigger problem if you start to plan it out too carefully. Coming up with a detailed plan can end up dragging you down a bit of a rabbit hole because the more detailed your plan is, the more of the major problems you have to solve before you can be complete.

The problem with reducing the details is that you could easily drive yourself down a pointless road if you don't know exactly where you're going. If you wrote an essay convinced you could use some particular evidence but later realize the evidence isn't all that convincing, you could easily waste hours writing material you'll never even get to use.

Solving this problem usually comes down to a bit of a change in perspective.

Many students work as if they're engineering the project. Engineering, in this context, is a process of pulling together complex tools to solve a particular problem. They're working in the end in mind and trying to create a perfect quality product from the beginning. This is a slow and very difficult process (particularly for an individual. Teams of people struggle through this process.)

It's better to think of large projects as a tinkering process. Tinkering isn't necessarily planning everything perfectly. You may have a general goal in mind but the steps to achieve that final goal are always in development based on the information you learn. Tinkering is less about perfection and more about testing.

In class, you are not building bridges that lives depend on. No one will die if you're imperfect with your work. You can try stuff and see how it works. If it doesn't work then you can try something else until it does work. When you're tinkering, getting things wrong is just an inevitable part of the process.

(Engineers tend to work in this way too. This is more of a perception problem than a real problem for engineers. Engineers know they screw up so they tinker and review work repeatedly. That being said,

people rarely see engineers as guess and checkers.)

You don't need to perfect your work now. You just need to take one piece, solve that little aspect of it, and repeat the process until you can put it all together.

This process can make large projects significantly less intimidating. If you see down with the hardest problem of a large project and solve it, even if you don't have the rest of the pieces all together, it can feel like the project is just going to get easier from there.

The more you learn to manage the way you think about your larger challenges, the better you're going to be able to manage those challenges. The way you feel makes a huge impact on the way you think.

46. Fear Is Good

This is an idea that was hinted towards earlier but deserves a deeper discussion.

Fear is a good thing. When you're worried about the grade you're going to get on any particular assignment, it can be a sign that you need to change something. That fear is a sign that you need to change your behavior or your perceptions of the situation. It's an indicator.

If people treated their check engine lights like they do their average fear they'd end up pulling over to the side of the road and never driving again. An indication isn't a sign that your world is about to end. It's a sign that you need to do something else. Don't just give up and worry about your problem. Do something about it.

If every time you felt a little fear that you'd fail an assignment, you just sat down and studied a little more, you would likely do well in school. If you're like most people you get so many of these little fears that it's likely you'd do extraordinarily well.

This is the most basic thing to do when you're scared. Do something about it.

That fear is an indicator that you need to know when

it's time to act on something. If you have multiple competing interests, that fear can guide you to the area that you find most pressing. If you're properly informed about your priorities and goals in your classes, this will lead you in the direction that you want to go.

Notice how this process requires you pay attention to your syllabus, goals, and everything else related to your classes. If you were to be ignorant of one important area, this fear could end up leading you in the wrong direction. If you weren't familiar with your syllabus you might mistake a low priority assignment as your largest priority instead of a high priority one. This fear grows in usefulness as you learn more about your situation.

When you know what matters, you can worry about what matters.

On that note: Many students let their fears get overblown. Believe it or not... failing that test isn't the end of the world. In fact, for 99% of students, failing that test will mean almost nothing by the next semester. The only students that should have major concerns about their grades are the ones competing at the absolute highest levels for exclusive spots. So... if you're going to MIT, maybe it is worth worrying. (That being said, I'd usually recommend not trying to compete unless you happen to be 95% of the way there already. The time and energy could be

better spent in other areas.)

The next time you feel the fear kicking in and you can't get your mind off it, try thinking it through a little. Imagine the worst possible scenario of your situation. Maybe you get kicked out of school and you get kicked out of your home. Considering that scenario, what could you do to solve your problems? Could you get back into a different school? Could you get a job? Could you learn some skills and compete without a formal education? Plenty of people do plenty of amazing things from spots much less cozy than where you are. Nothing is hopeless.

At a certain point, fear is irrational. If it is then keep that in mind. Irrational fears are wasted time. You might as well be doing something fun. If you're really stuck in an irrational fear then just do something to get your mind off of it.

If your fear seems warranted then give it the chance to deliver its message. Find what's causing it and act on what you learn.

Good Practice

The day to day decisions you make are what define the results you get with this strategy.

You cannot eliminate or dramatically reduce an important part of school like studying without getting the rest of the factors in order. If you fail to follow through with other important aspects of school then you're bound to just push your grade farther away from where you're looking to get it .

The other factors that you need to get in order include some things that you should already be worrying about. They're the kind of strategies that should be a part of every student's process. They're basic strategies that provide a consistently high value compared to the investment required. Despite that, the vast majority of students rarely pay any attention to them.

In the day to day life of a student, many of these strategies seem to become a bit routine and unnecessary. Most students know they should be worrying about them but get caught up in the day to day creative tasks like finishing their assignments while giving less and less consideration to the more mundane aspects of taking their class.

Believe it or not, the mundane aspects are where good students prove themselves to be great student. A good student can complete all the required work to the required quality level. A great student can complete all the required work to a higher than required quality level. While a good student may hand in a good assignment the day it's due, the great student would be handing in an assignment that exceeds the expectations of the teachers. The way these assignments shine can vary but it usually includes a few of the following:

It Looks Good

Great students tend to make their work aesthetically appealing. They make the first impression their teacher gets a good one. Neatness may not be an official part of the score but it does play a role.

It's Well Thought Out

Great students tend not to leave major holes in their thought process. After the teacher is finished reading the assignment they'll rarely be thinking, "why didn't he/she mention..."

It's Natural

Plenty of good students can paper mache a good enough essay together. Great students tend to produce work that seems like it's coming right out of

their mouth. The words flow well.

It's To The Point

The average good student can write thousands of words about a subject while never hitting any important points. The great student can write 10 words about the same subject and still hit a nerve. This aspect will only be glanced at in this section. Later it will be expanded on.

These differences come from the difference between the way a good student approaches their work and the way an average student does. It also has to do with the expectations they have. If you accept “good enough” work then you’re bound to produce work that’s just good enough. To turn good enough into high quality you need to be willing to push a little farther.

47. Edit Your Work

“Have you even read this yet?” I asked him. It’s a question I asked despite already knowing the answer.

I was going through a friend’s essay trying to give him a little bit of feedback on how to improve it. I had just finished the second paragraph and I had counted 3 or 4 spelling mistakes and a few very poorly worded sentences. I knew what he was trying to say but it seemed to be completely unfinished.

“I wrote it,” he responded laughing a little.

I knew where he was coming from. I had done it for years before then. I used to write in the same way. I would, eventually, after hours of avoiding it, sit down and write an essay. Then I would be satisfied. Since I had the assignment done, I accepted that I did my job. I would print out a copy and call it a day. I wouldn’t read through a single word of the stuff I wrote.

Once I finally started to realize how many points this ended up costing me it all started to click for me. Most of the time, not reading my own work would cost me somewhere around five points explicitly. When I would get my paper back there would typically be a couple spelling mistakes and a few poorly worded sentences.

These problems don't look all that bad until you start to add up the points you're losing on every single assignment over mistakes that are preventable.

5 points on one assignment isn't so bad. 5 points on almost every assignment starts to add up fast.

Once I finally started to try and change my ways I discovered something significantly more important that I'd been missing for years. I'd read through what I wrote and think, "Wow... this paper is absolutely dreadful." Sure... I was writing okay papers but I was absolutely dreading the process of reading them. They were boring and rarely interested me at all. I then started to think, "I wonder how my teacher feels reading this kind of crap."

After that I experimented with producing essays that I would actually be proud of producing by focusing on subjects and ideas that I thought would be interesting to read. That way, it wouldn't be so miserable to actually sit down and review them. As you can probably imagine, that ended up producing dramatically more than the initial 5 points I was losing for simple mistakes. On top of that, since I actually started to produce work I was proud of (or at the very least, amused by.)

By producing content that you feel comfortable reviewing, and reviewing it, you are putting yourself in the best possible position to impress your teacher.

You're more likely to gain their interest and that is a sure fire way to improve your grades.

Minimally, it will show your teacher that you're putting time into reviewing your work. (When they see simple spelling mistakes, they assume it's because you failed to check your own work.) If you're lucky than it can help you start to enjoy the work you're creating even more because you're producing something you'd actually want to read

48. Find A Second Editor

Reading your own work is the first and most important step. It ensures that you're going to be able to catch the most obvious silly mistakes you've made. It also gives you the chance to push yourself towards more interesting subjects. After you take the time to read your own work, it's usually best to get another person into the process too.

Checking your own work is good but it can lead to missing silly little mistakes. When you're the person that initially wrote something, as you're checking through it you could easily just read over little spelling or grammar mistakes. Instead of reading what you wrote directly off the paper you end up reading more into the thoughts you were having as you wrote what ended up on the paper.

It's almost inevitable you'll end up making mistakes that you can't catch yourself. You could read through your work hundreds of times and it wouldn't catch everything. In fact, past the second or third readthrough, you're probably producing virtually no value compared to getting a second set of eyes reading what you wrote.

When a new person reads through what you wrote, they're dramatically more likely to catch those hard to

see mistakes. They can also tell whether or not you're actually making any sense to someone not familiar with what you know.

You don't need anyone fancy to be this second set of eyes going over your work. In fact, at times, getting too strong of a background person reading your essay could end up just hurting it's quality. One of the easiest and most effective people to use as a reviewer for your work is another student. (In some assignments this may be frowned upon. Make sure to know when it's appropriate and when it's not.)

A student that is also working on the same assignment as you has one of the best perspectives of what needs to be produced. They can read through it and let you know if it seems to be on track or not. Since they're in the same boat as you, they'll rarely lead you too far astray. At the same time, they may not be as disciplined with grammar or spelling.

The farther you go from the same classroom to get your second set of eyes reading it, the more you have to disregard certain statements. If you were to hire a PHD to read through your essay for you, you could quickly trust their assessments on the spelling and grammar of your essay. At the same time, you'd have to be cautious about their opinions on your thesis and whether or not you're actually following the assignment's requirements. A lot of these ideas are highly contextual. Some teachers want you to take the

general idea of an essay and run with it. Others want you to stay directly on the rules.

Getting a second editor is the important part. Who you end up getting is up for your own convenience. Even if you don't find anyone that's particularly good at the subject you're working on, they can still end up helping you with the questions they ask (even when they don't know they're doing it.)

Checking your own work will bring you most of the way to a properly written essay. It's almost impossible to go the rest of the way without first getting another editor involved in the process. Even professionals require an editing process. It may not be fun to get your work checked by someone else but it's going to get checked by someone eventually, you might as well pick someone you like to help you get the kinks out first.

49. Neatness Points

Teachers rarely talk about giving points to students that produce neater work.

People like to pretend that neatness is a factor that individuals can't control. They talk about some people having neat handwriting and other people having messy handwriting. That being said, when someone is forced to write down something where neatness matters, almost everyone that can write legibly.

To some extent, the neatness of someone's writing and work comes down to the years of habits they've developed. Student's that have spent years writing fast and sloppy will struggle to slow down and write neat. Student's that have spent years writing neat may end up struggling to increase their speed of writing. That doesn't, however, put it out of a person's control. Most people can improve their neatness if they're making an effort towards it.

Teachers certainly don't talk about this factor but it's something that you'll notice consistently when you start watching for it. Consistently good students tend to write more neat than average.

This makes sense. Teachers don't like having to read through illegible papers. They're humans looking to

get their own work done as fast as possible. When they're struggling to make out letters on a piece of paper, they're getting more and more frustrated towards the student who wrote the paper. This will, whether the teacher intends to or not, end up reflecting on the student's final grade.

This is just basic human nature.

The way you present yourself will change the way people think about you. If you were to dress sloppy and dirty and apply for a high paying managerial job, you'd expect them to laugh you out of the competition. If you wore a suit and cleaned up then you'd expect to be given a fair shot. The same goes for the way you present your work.

If you hand your teacher a crumbled up sheet of paper with chicken scratch handwriting all over it, you're going to be categorizing yourself with the other students that really couldn't care less what they got on their assignment. If you hand in a neat sheet with clean handwriting on it, you're going to be categorizing yourself with the students that care about their grade. The teacher will put you in the same category as you present yourself.

Handwriting is only the start of neatness. Keeping the work you're going to have to hand in neat also has to do with keeping it someplace it won't get torn up and crushed. When you're producing anything out of the

traditional classroom format, you should be working to make it look as good as you know how to do. These assignments are particularly useful because they allow you to stand out with your own creativity to show the teacher you're not just the average neat student (without needing to waste tons of extra hours cleaning up your usual assignments.)

Producing neat work should always be a priority. You don't need to be producing perfect looking assignments. You can have smudges and the occasional strangely curved word at the end of the page but it can't look like you were trying to complete the assignment as fast as you've ever written in your life. Even if you were thinking like that.

50. Provide More Info Than You Need

Show your work.

This is a regularly emphasized idea in most math classes.

Teachers are supposed to grade you on the process you use in math. If you're able to do 95% of the steps correctly but still get the answer wrong for some minor reason, the teacher has to judge how well you followed the steps.

If you don't show your work then the teacher has to assume that an incorrect answer was achieved without using the proper steps. If, on the other hand, you provide all the steps you used to get where you ended then you give more opportunities for the teacher to give you points for following the correct steps.

This is a relatively common idea in math classes. It makes a lot of sense to focus on the process instead of the actual answer when there is only one right or wrong answer. One small miscalculation can end up screwing answers in millions of different directions that all look equally wrong. It may not be brought up regularly but this same concept applies in every course that you take.

When you provide extra information for any subject, you increase the chances that you'll provide the information the teacher needs to come to the same conclusion as you. Ideas that seem like a bit of a given should be proved. In questions where there is any room for interpretation, you shouldn't only be aiming to provide the answer to the teacher. You should be aiming to provide the answer plus how you got to it and maybe even a little extra knowledge. As long as the answer is provided, you will still get credit for the answer. More likely, you'll get more unofficial credit from the teacher for paying attention.

One of the funny things about providing extra information is that it often acts as a bit of a smokescreen for the information that you genuinely don't know the answer to. At times, teachers will read through your response and, since you provided so much information, assume that you provided the actual answer to the question. (This is a lesson that you can take from the typical politician.)

Other times teachers will see all the related information and throw you a few points for making a good effort.

With this strategy you're also reinforcing the information that you already know.

Even if the teacher fails to see your correct answer in

your smokescreen of information, as long as you actually wrote the answer, you can always point it out directly to the teacher later to get full credit because it was the teacher's error. There is almost no risk to getting a bit verbose with your answers.

This strategy can be taken too far. In general, don't expand your answers longer than the allotted space unless it's a genuine challenge but always aim to tightly fill that space you have available. If you're given unlimited space then just expand it to your comfort level based on the specific time constraints you have.

51. Get Second Opinions

The most powerful tool you have to improving your grades is everyone else's brain. The better you get at learning from the people around you, the more you're going to be able to focus on the aspects of your classes that really matter.

Your first, and often best, resource is other students. All the students in your class are making similar calculations as you are. Some are making those calculations intentionally while others are just winging it. Each one of these students is taking those calculations and doing their own, usually, unintentional experiments and checking out their own results. They're watching how what they do is changing their grades. When you have dozens of students running experiments, some of them are going to strike gold.

Again... most of this isn't a conscious decision by the students. They're just winging it and sticking with what works. The students that find the right strategies are the students that you should be learning something from.

By communicating with other students you can find the students with the wrong strategies. You can usually recognize them by their constant complaints

about working too hard and not quite doing as well as they want. You may also find some of the students with the right strategies that are doing well in the course (some with less effort than others.)

Other students can also bounce ideas for important essays or projects back and forth. (I typically do this by presenting the idea and watching the look on their face. If they look bored I assume it's a boring idea. If they look mildly offended or surprised then I think I might be onto something fun.)

You only know so much. It always helps to get second opinions from other people. Students, in particular, can help you see avenues that you otherwise might have missed.

There are more people to communicate with than other students though.

Second opinions can come directly from the teacher. This is particularly useful if you're pushing for a little bit of an unusual take on an assignment your teacher gave. You don't want to get too creative with your interpretation of an assignment or you risk getting it handed back to you without a grade on it. Getting a second opinion from your teacher can help.

Teachers can also be a good resource to find genuinely interesting resources about a subject. Some teachers (particularly the ones that genuinely

enjoy their subject,) actually spend their free time studying their subject. They often have access to more entertaining resources than the textbooks. If you find one of these teachers then asking for their advice for more casual information about the subject can end up helping you appreciate the subject more (and improve your relationship with the teacher.)

You can't isolate yourself and expect to make the best out of your grade. No individual is creative or smart enough to stay ahead in everything forever. There will always be some area that you miss something. When you do miss it, you want a web of people to help point you back in the right direction.

52. Write For The Wait-Basket

There is an old phrase about writing that I tend to agree with. It says, “write for the wastebasket.”

This is recommending that, to help fight procrastination, just start writing something without any intention of keeping it. You’re just writing stuff to fill up the page and get your juices flowing a bit. In some way, you’re writing just to crumble up the paper and throw it in the wastebasket later.

This strategy is very effective. People writing for the wastebasket end up writing dramatically more in dramatically less time. They may end up throwing away a draft or two but they’ll end up with a higher quality essay in about the same amount of time as average. If you were to follow this plan you would likely end up well above the average student.

I find that a slightly altered strategy tends to be a little more efficient though.

Writing for the wastebasket works well because it forces the writer to stop worrying about the quality of the work they’re producing. They’re not constantly critiquing their work and impeding their own progress. That leaves them a whole lot less stressed. It also makes their work sound more natural. The problem is

that this idea seems to emphasize you're writing something that's worth throwing out.

Contrary to that, I find that the faster and less critically I write a first draft, the better that first draft tends to come out. It doesn't always turn out that way but more often than not the first draft can be a huge chunk of the final draft. There is rarely an intermediate draft starting from scratch.

Instead of writing something, judging it, and throwing it away if it doesn't work, it's often more effective to write something, wait a while, and then judge it. In other words, "write for the wait basket." Write it uncritically and quickly and let yourself judge it a day or two later when you've had time to sit on the ideas.

This will sometimes lead you to trashing ideas you previously thought worked. Whether you're trying or not, you'll catch stupid mistakes that you would have just missed. This waiting process can lead you to coming up with the details you need to change to turn your mediocre work into really good work.

Writing quickly and uncritically means mistakes. You shouldn't go into it with the intention of throwing out the mediocrity you sometimes produce. The mediocrity is okay. Better writers don't become better writers because they start from scratch and luck into the right words. They become better writers because they're willing to tear up their mediocrity and turn it

into something that is extraordinary. At the very least, they're usually willing to try.

Maybe a day later you will decide your work is worth throwing away. That is okay but it shouldn't be a decision that's reached without giving it some thought. Over time, you'll find some of your favorite essays come from some of the most mediocre original drafts. Your writing process just produces the environment that your good ideas need to grow.

Write uncritically and then give yourself time to sit think about it. Separate the review process as far as you practically can from the writing process.

53. Skip The Textbook

One sure-fire way to do mediocre at something is to direct your energy into the least efficient means of achieving it.

This one of the most common problems that students suffer from. They don't have a problem putting in the effort when they have to. In fact, most of the students that do mediocre in their classes spend plenty of time on their classes. A student that's doing great may spend a few hours a week on their class. A student that's doing good often spends a dozen or more hours on their class right before the test alone. Then they shove in more scattered sessions to add to that investment. The problem isn't the time. It's where they're spending that time.

One of the worst places for a student to invest their time is in their textbook. Textbooks are terrible for studying for most tests. They have some uses. They make good resources to look information up. They can offer reasonably good summaries near the beginning and end of their chapters. They might give some valuable problems to practice with. They work well to hold your papers and make a class look difficult. They are virtually never good for studying.

Studying should be heavily focused on the information

that your teacher plans on testing. Teachers virtually never create their test with the textbook chapters in mind. Teachers make their test based on the information they're required to teach the students. When the teacher is making the test, you can count on other resources the teacher gives you being dramatically more valuable to your studying than any textbook. The textbook was written by some random guy or gal that wasn't writing it for just your teacher's class. The things the writer finds important may not be so important to your teacher.

On top of that, textbooks are not written to be memorable. They're written to be as accurate as possible. As accurate as possible has its value but it rarely is good for being memorable.

Memorable typically involves factors that can rarely be discussed in textbooks. Textbooks can't afford going into the interesting little details because that makes them risk being unusable by the average school. (Schools can't go buying textbooks with any serious bias without some backlash. They aim to buy the least controversial stuff they can.)

Despite these problems, some students insist upon picking up their textbook every single time they plan on studying. In many ways, studying out of your textbook is the lazy approach to studying. It doesn't require you take any notes. You don't have to keep your papers organized to go through them later. You

don't have to look at your old assignments. You don't have to dig in to try and find what your teacher thinks is important. You just sit down, stare at the page, and eventually start daydreaming about stuff way more interesting than whatever your textbook happens to be talking about.

If you want to reduce your study time then give up on using your textbook for your studying. If you want to eliminate your studying, don't worry about losing your textbook study time because that will rarely harm you much.

Studying through the textbook may make you feel like you're being productive but it will be making you productive in the same way digging a hole in the ground with a spoon would. Sure... you're doing something but what's the point and if there is a point, why aren't you just using a shovel.

Test Strategies

“I’m not a good test taker”

That has to be one of the most common complaints I hear from students. I’ve communicated with thousands of students who’ve read my blog posts or books and I can almost always count on getting this comment if I talk to them long enough. It’s predictable. The only time when I don’t expect to hear it is when the subject of testing never comes up to begin with.

Almost no one thinks that they’re a good test taker.

After years of struggling on tests, I’ve become comfortable saying I’m a pretty good test taker. Give me a test that I’m completely unqualified for and I could squeak out a surprisingly good result.

For years, I thought I was a bad test taker too. I could get a good enough grade on a test but I always was stressed and worried through the whole process. I would leave the test feeling completely confused about how well I did on the test. When I finally saw my grade I felt relief in the moment because I’d expected worse but inside, I still felt a little disappointed because I knew I could have done better.

Do you ever feel like you're capable of doing better on tests? The reality is that virtually everyone is.

Test taking is a skill. It's a skill that will have a huge impact on 90% of the classes you take for the rest of your life. It will improve your ability to take qualification tests for the rest of your life. Even getting a little bit better at taking tests will have an amazing impact because it will probably end up improving your grade for hundreds or thousands of tests in your future. Not only that but it will boost your confidence dramatically.

When given the choice between improving your knowledge for a single class, or improving the skill of test taking. You should virtually always aim to improve your general ability at test taking because that will impact everything you do for the rest of your life and not just give you a short term boost to your grade.

Becoming a skilled test taker is not easy because it requires you change the habitual feelings you get whenever a test is coming up. It requires strategies that aren't always easy. It requires a certain amount of willingness to take risks. Most importantly of all, it requires a reasonable perspective about what to expect out of yourself.

When you finally do start to develop this skill, you'll start to notice that tests continuously get less and less stressful. Despite that, you'll notice your grades

getting more consistent and higher than you're used to. Once you start to pull it all together the results will be worth almost any effort you have to put in to get them.

Develop your ability to take tests and virtually everything about the way you think about school will start to change for the better. You do not have to be a bad test taker. It doesn't take an extraordinary memory or any other unusual gifts. It just takes a commitment to the skill of test taking.

54. Everything Is A Test

People don't remember stuff that they don't have to remember.

Memory is kind of cool like that. What's the point of remembering information that you have at easy access anyway? When I was a youngun' anyone that had a cell phone was still considered a bit of a showoff. Cells phones were these massive bricks with long antennas on them. Back in this day, people could actually remember each other's phone numbers.

People remembered phone numbers because they didn't have their cell phone contact list two seconds away. It was a bit of a necessity. These days you'd be hard pressed to find a person that can list 5 or 6 different people's phone numbers off their cell phone contact list.

When people have access to resources, they don't feel the need to remember the information. In fact, it's downright silly to remember a lot of the information because it's easier just to look it up.

Have you ever heard someone tell you something like, "when you're stressed or sad just sit down and write down your problems." In case you've never tried this, I find it to be awfully cathartic. This might seem

like a bit of a tangent but this works partially because it does just what your memory likes to do. It offloads your brain and puts the information somewhere that it's easily accessible. Once you write something down, it's almost pointless to keep thinking about it. Writing it down, in some ways, gives permission to your brain to forget it.

Think about how this applies to school.

In most of school, you'll have resources to look stuff up when you need to. If your teacher gives you homework then you have virtually unlimited resources to look up and find the solution to any problem that you run into. You can ask other students. You can look in the textbook. You can go online. You can ask the teacher. You have all the answers available to you. Just like your cell phone contact list, this can make it significantly less likely for you to remember something important.

When you're trying to find the answer to a question, don't immediately look it up. If you think that you learned the information at any point in the past then give yourself time. (If you're convinced you never heard the answer to the question then feel free to look it up the first time.)

When you are willing to immediately open up your textbook, or look something up somewhere, you're getting your brain into the habit of using resources

other than your memory. This will improve your grade and efficiency on your assignments. It will make them less stressful. That's good but at the same time, it's completely undermining your ability to take the test.

Whenever you're not sure if you can remember something, you need to push yourself to remember it. Forget looking something up. If you have time then give yourself time. Every time you make one of these difficult connections, you are reminding your brain that this information needs to be remembered. Not only that but you're practicing the skills that become important when the test comes.

When a test is sitting in front of you, you will not have the choice to look up the answers to your questions (most of the time. Open textbook tests are the rare exception.) You will need to dig into your memory and search for the information you need. If you're well practiced at this skill, it won't be a chore. Over time, it may even start to feel good.

It feels good to get those hard to find memories consistently. It feels even better to see the results on your test afterwards.

55. The Pieces Must Fit

Whenever you're working on something for class you should be focusing a good chunk of your energy on finding connections between that information. The information you're learning shouldn't be thought of as an individual list of facts unless you're willing to sit down and memorize them for a reasonable amount of time. If you're looking to reduce your study time then you need to stop thinking about information in little chunks of facts, and start focusing on the connections between the information you're learning.

Your goal before the test needs to be centered around learning the web of information. The more you understand how everything connects with everything else, the more likely you are to remember it. If you struggle to remember one fact then you are more likely to find it if you know related information. If you go even farther and understand how they connect, you can use basic reasoning to answer questions you would have otherwise had no idea about.

This idea has been discussed a little already in this book. This offers another advantage though.

To pass tests effectively without using studying, you need to be well practiced in disciplined thinking too. The basic information and how that information

interacts with other information can help you reason your way through problems you couldn't otherwise solve.

Deductive reasoning is the first way these connections can help. Keep in mind, there isn't much space for expansion so this is going to be a bit of a simplification of a much more complicated subject. This is just a rough example to get you started thinking about it. Deductive reasoning is when you have premises that, if right, instantly prove another premise.

If you are taking a test and know that tigers are mammals and you know mammals don't lay eggs then you can logically conclude that tigers don't lay eggs. That is deductive reasoning. You can use that kind of thinking when you're trying to solve an answer that you never directly took the time to learn.

To complicate it a little, even if it's deductive, if the basic premises are wrong then your answer may not be right. In that previous example, the platypuses in the reading audience might get a little offended because they are, in fact, a mammal that lays eggs.

The reality is, you will be wrong at times despite your best efforts to be deductive. That's part of it. That's kind of where inductive reasoning comes in.

Imagine your teacher has the habit of giving multiple

choice tests with the answer D being right all the time. No... not some of the time but every example you've seen. If you were to take that teacher's course (an easy A I hope,) even if you didn't know the answer to a question, you'd still guess D. That is using inductive reasoning.

There is no reason to know that the teacher won't just start making all the right answers A. Despite only having examples of the teacher choosing D, you can't logically conclude that D is the only answer the teacher can have. In many ways, it's just a well educated guess.

There will be times when you think you see a pattern that you can exploit to get more points. At times, this pattern will not be the answer you feel most comfortable with. Despite that, when you think you've found a logical pattern, it's usually worth taking a shot and hoping for the best.

Naturally, you won't find patterns as simple as a teacher giving the same answer to a multiple choice question. The patterns you'll usually find are in the actual information of the class.

Imagine you are asked what the word, "audiograligraphy" means. Given a multiple choice test with the answers "artistic speaking," "old chocolate cake," "an old time insult for presidential candidates," or "a month in summer," using the evidence of other

words saying “audio” you should probably induce it’s the answer most related to sound.

Think and you may be able to find answers that you don’t know you know.

56. Know What You Know

When you're taking tests, you need to know when you're using your memory and when you're using a form of reasoning to solve a problem. If you fail to keep track of the difference then you'll end up wasting your time on problems that aren't your top priority.

When you're preparing for a test (and not investing in studying,) it's more important to understand what you understand well than to understand everything. It's impossible to know everything. It's better to make sure that you're actually getting value out of the stuff you spend your time thinking about. This will help you prepare your educated guesses in the future.

When you know what you know well, you will never end up getting stuck on a problem thinking about what you think you should know. You may remember that feeling of knowing that you know the answer but can't quite get it out. The answer can feel like it's on the tip of your tongue.

Of course, it has no value there. By knowing information well you should be able to step through a large chunk of the problems just about as fast as you can write the answer. This is a good thing. The speed adds up into a very powerful advantage. It helps keep stress levels down and it increases the time you have

for what you don't think you know as well.

If you don't know whether or not you know an answer then you're not preparing properly for the test.

When you're well versed in a subject, and you've had immediate access to the information, answers aren't going to end up on the tip of your tongue. You're going to know whether or not you know it. Failing to know it is a sign that something is wrong with your current approach.

Sometimes it's a failure to focus your energy on specific high priority sets of information. If you're spreading yourself too thin then you're bound to fail to learn some of the information you think you're supposed to know. It's better to target that information and even miss a few important things that were harder to predict.

Sometimes not knowing what you know is a sign that you're not learning the information in the first place. If you're not paying as much attention in class as you should, you're not going to remember what you need to remember when you need it. You might even start thinking, "ohhh... I know the teacher mentioned this..." and drive yourself nuts trying to think of it.

When you're on the right track with other areas of your routine, this will be a sign of it. When you're not

doing well with the other strategies then you'll feel it in the way you take tests. You must keep paying attention to signals like this because you'll always be finding yourself falling back into them in some area. As soon as you start feeling comfortable in one area, you're bound to start noticing more problems in another area. The key is to constantly be putting your energy right where you need it.

Signals like this one are one of the easiest ways you can tell when you need to start buckling down again without waiting for your grades to start showing the consequences.

57. Don't Overthink It

There are thousands of ways you can tweak your test taking skills a little. It's an area that has virtually unlimited area for growth. Despite all those potential areas for growth, 95% of your improvements will come from the most simple aspects.

Your first priority needs to be increasing your comfort level during the average test. People like to think they'll learn to relax a little while taking when they start getting good grades. They spend year after year staying uncomfortable but always thinking that it might get different in the future. Their grades never end up improving to the level they'd feel comfortable with.

It's usually better to start the other way around. Instead of starting to feel comfortable only after your grades improve, you should be learning to feel comfortable and then you can worry about improving your grades. As long as test taking makes you uncomfortable, you're going to be fighting an uphill battle. Every step forward you take is going to be a bigger challenge with less impact until you start learning to get comfortable.

As soon as you start getting comfortable with test taking, improving your test taking will become dramatically easier.

Improving your grades before getting comfortable is a never ending battle.

One way you can do this is to learn to make better guesses. There are certain ways of guessing that can increase your grades. This is a skill that will take some practice to start getting good at. Practicing this strategy can lead your grades to fluctuating a little. That could shake you and your grades up a little. In the short term, it can increase the amount of stress you feel.

Similar problems occur with most methods of improving your test taking ability. The learning curve can be a painful one. Those growing pains will just make you worse at test taking if you're not good at staying relaxed during the test.

These methods may be good for improving your grades once you have some other factors in order but they're not effective until you have those factors in order. Trying to learn better test taking tweak while you can't even stay relaxed taking a test is like throwing a person who doesn't know how to swim in the middle of the ocean. They may fail. They may succeed. If they do succeed, odds are they're going to develop some terrible habits in the process. They're certainly not going to know the breaststroke at the end of the day.

You need to do everything in your power to not overthink your test taking. When you're taking a test, you should know how to worry about nothing but the questions being asked. Over time you can add extra concepts into the mix to improve your grades a little but the majority of your grade is going to come from your ability to relax.

Turning stressed test taking into relaxed test taking is preliminary to most other test taking skills.

58. Imperfection Is Good

You don't want to get a perfect grade.

What? You think I'm crazy. Maybe a little but not based on that statement.

Perfect grades can be taken as a good thing. They can be taken as a sign that you had all the required knowledge to answer every question on the test. This, in itself, is a good thing. That being said, grades can also be a sign of a serious problem.

Virtually anyone could pass any test if they spent enough time at it. Being able to memorize a list of required information is nothing to be too proud of. It can offer some advantages for college applications and impressing people on trivia night but it's often trivial knowledge. Getting a perfect score can also be done by almost anyone with enough time.

Most people do not study enough to get perfect grades because, quite frankly, they don't care that much. The difference between getting a 99 and a 100 academically is virtually irrelevant. For 75% of students (the ones that don't plan on competing for tight college spots) the difference between a C- and an A+ is hardly relevant. The reality is, there are more important things in life than grades. Even if there

weren't more important things, getting too high a grade could still be a problem.

A perfect grade is a sign of probable inefficiency. If you're preparing for a test, your goals should be to learn everything that you need to learn for the test and nothing more. Every extra thing you learn, assuming this isn't your immediate career plan, is a waste of time and energy. It's studying that could have been used on something else.

If you get a perfect score on a test then, odds are, you ended up learning an excessive amount of information for the test. Perfect grades are disproportionately more difficult in comparison to almost perfect scores.

Imagine you're given a test of 100 questions. To prepare you're given a list of 1000 facts to learn. If you score a 90 on that test then there would have been 10 potential answers that would have earned you another point. That means you would have had to learn one tenth of those 900 remaining facts (or 90 of the facts) to earn one more point. If you scored a 99% on that test you would only have 1 potential answer to improve your score. To find that last 1 point you would have had to memorize virtually all of the remaining facts.

Earlier points are easier because there are more potential questions for you to know to earn the point.

To earn a perfect grade requires either amazing luck from studying the perfect amount of time or, more likely, a dramatically excessive study routine. Since the time difference between these higher scores is so great, that the student usually could have done more for their grade if they spent that time on some other focus area. The one point they earned to turn their grade from a 99 to a 100 could have turned their 85 into a 90 for the same amount of work.

Don't waste your time on perfection. It's better to focus on consistency where you're doing well and improvements where you need them most.

How To Remember Everything (Enough)

There are humans that can remember absolutely everything they've ever experienced. While most people struggle to remember silly little parts of their day, these people are capable of remembering birthdays from decades ago with such intricate detail that they could make a movie of the whole day.

These kinds of memories are unusual. Scientists have developed many theories about them but no one really understands them. That being said, this kind of a memory can help the way you think about memory. There is no way to prove this is actually true but it's a bit of a tool you can use to simplify the way you think about remembering stuff.

To help prove this idea's existence, have you ever been triggered by some stimuli into remembering something from years ago? Maybe you smelled something and suddenly thought of another thing that smells similar despite having not smelled it in years. (The old grandma's apple pie smelling anecdote.) Or maybe you say something that suddenly reminded you of something you would have otherwise never remembered.

Your brain remembers more information than you think it does. In fact, I think it's worth assuming that

your brain remembers absolutely everything. Just like these men and women that can remember absolutely every detail of their life, you have those memories stored.

The way you can access those memories is by finding the proper links to those memories. You may not be able to pull out those memories by the date and time but you can pull out those memories by random sights and smells unique to those memories.

As I said before, this may not be true but it's worth assuming it is.

Whenever you see something, it's impossible to know whether or not you really can remember it or not. A decade from now you might find that hard to find memory. If you can't remember something in the moment, it's a safer bet that you just lack the tools or links to actually dig that memory out of wherever you're storing it than to assume that you never remembered it in the first place.

Once you start to accept that virtually every memory you ever made is accessible, you'll start to find new ways to access those memories. If you just settle and think you will never remember something then you will not be able to take the steps required to actually remember those things.

You don't need some gifted memory. All you need is a

little confidence and the memory you were born with and you'll do fine. Most of the people in the world with a "great memory" aren't all that gifted. They're just regular people that have happened to learn a few tricks for remembering difficult to remember sets of information. You give those same tricks to anyone with an average memory and they'll have memories that are stronger than a good percentage of people with only a natural gift towards remembering stuff.

59. Make It Worth Remembering

Imagine it's your first day and the teacher steps in front of the class. It's the beginning of the school year and you're jazzed to get focusing again. Sure... you may have had problems in the past but this year you planned on kicking butt and taking names. Then your teacher starts talking.

In that moment everything comes back to you. The teacher's voice is monotone. It's almost like he's trying to make his voice meld into the background of the room. You try really hard to listen to the teacher talking. You repeat what the teacher says. You stare excessively forward but inevitably, within minutes you're busy staring at the back of the attractive person a few rows in front of you... Or maybe you're thinking about what you're going to eat for lunch. Maybe some combination of the two. Anyway... you've failed.

It is not easy to stay focused when something is boring but if you can't stay focused you will never be able to remember what you need to remember. Focus is the essential first step to remembering something that isn't mind blowingly important to you. Food and that attractive person are memorable because they're base biological goals. The something or other your teacher is talking about is not. You need to get

focused.

The good thing about a boring lecturer is that, if you're paying attention to your course selection with the criteria discussed earlier in this book, you'll never get stuck with them teaching your class. There is one other boring lecturer that you still have to worry about though. **Yourself.**

Boring teachers are usually boring teachers because they never take the time to find what is actually interesting about their subject to the average person. When you're preparing to learn a subject, you shouldn't make the same mistake. Don't just rush into learning what you need to learn. First you want to learn why what you need to learn is actually interesting.

If something is interesting then you're giving your brain a chance of remembering it. You can do even more to improve your memory of information though.

Once you figure out why something is interesting, try to figure out why it is memorable. This is a process of digging into the subject looking for the notable aspects. What's a notable aspect? Sex, violence, power, stories, strangeness, or humor are typical examples. These kinds of factors make your brain naturally want to remember the information.

This can also include aspects more personal to

yourself. You can also look to find how information relates to other information that you already find interesting. If you think math is boring but baseball statistics are interesting then try to figure out how those two factors interact with each other. This is making the facts more memorable in a more personal way.

If you're not remembering a set of information then more times than not, it's the way that information is being delivered that is to blame. Of course, you can't control your teachers or the books you have to read or the stories you hear. The only person that you really can convince to deliver the information better is yourself.

60. Limit Repetition

Teachers virtually always recommend repetition to help students remember information. If a student goes over the same piece of information enough times, eventually, no matter how unfocused they were, it's just going to start to stick. This is one of the most sure-fire brainless ways to remember. You can give this repetition advice to a child without any experience and they'll see success if they implement it.

Despite that, I absolutely hate advising people to use repetition to remember things.

Yes. Repetition is consistent and effective. The problem is that it's wildly inefficient and it just encourages the worst possible study habits.

When someone decides to start using a repetitive strategy to learn something, they're pretty much accepting that they're going to stop focusing after a while. It's a bit of a given. They may focus through the first few minutes but in no time they'll be feeling their brain shutting down completely as they just cycle through the required information. The next time they start studying they'll get to that unfocused state even more efficiently than they did the time before. This is the skill they will develop. They will learn how to be great at zoning out.

Over time, that great skill of zoning up will stop allowing them to learn more information. At that point they're going to have to struggle to get their mind back in the habit of focusing while trying to learn.

It's much easier to forget about repetition that doesn't come naturally. If the subject comes up then remembering something is good for you. If the subject doesn't come up then it may not be worth remembering in the first place. By avoiding intentional repetition you're increasing your ability to stay habitually focused when you're involved in things related to an important class.

More importantly, it requires you start to learn more efficient methods of remembering information. When repetition is no longer an option you're forced to prioritize the information you're learning and spend the time required to actually learn and remember it based on its inherent qualities.

Remembering something out of repetition will get you the points on the test. It's just not as efficient as countless other methods. In my previous books, I've listed study strategies that can teach you the same information in much less time. Repetition usually will play a role but the more it becomes a necessity, the worse off you're going to be. The less repetition you need, the faster you're going to learn, and the more you're going to remember long term. More importantly

for the student not looking to study often, it will just distract you for the real memorable hooks about the information you have to learn.

These memorable hooks may be the information discussed in the previous section. It's much better to remember something because there is something inherently interesting about it than to remember something because you've made it a habit. When something is actually interesting, you're more likely to be able to remember it years later. When you're just habitually remembering it, you'll be luck if it lasts until test time.

61. Have A Good Reason

You need to know why you want good grades. Otherwise, you probably don't actually want good grades.

Most students want good grades to please the people around them. Many students are just studying to keep their parents happy. They may want to make their parents proud or, more likely, they're just terrified to let their parents down.

They may want to make their teachers happy. In reality, what they're looking for isn't good grades. They're just looking to please certain people around them.

This is one of the most frustrating motivations you'll ever have because it's impossible to please other people with the actions you take while consistently pleasing yourself. First of all, I can almost guarantee your parents or teachers will never say "that's an acceptable level. You've pleased me perfectly." This is so rare that it's hardly worth considering. They may stop complaining at a certain level (if you're lucky) but don't expect them to decide you've reached the goal unless (possibly) they've already specifically defined it.

More importantly than this though, you will constantly be at war with yourself. You will not always share the same goals as the people around you have for you. Someday you will end up conflicting with their goals. When that day comes, you will end up suffering immensely to try and please them and yourself. The reality is that sometimes it's impossible to make everyone happy. Either you will suffer or they will be upset.

This is one of the most challenging motivations to have.

Some students are looking towards their own future. They believe that the best way to make sure they make lots of money, get a handsome/beautiful spouse, or in any other way live the life they dream about is to do well in school now. Maybe they believe that's because they'll get into a better college or maybe they just think the knowledge will make the difference.

This is a little bit easier a motivation to have.

That being said, it's still a little bit of a challenge. College doesn't guarantee a good job. A good job doesn't guarantee a good spouse. A good spouse doesn't guarantee a happy life. Heck... good grades don't guarantee a good college will accept you. It's all a bunch of maybes down this road. You're putting yourself in a statistically good position but it's all a bit

of a gamble.

I always go back to thinking about the idea that you could get hit by a bus tomorrow. Would all that extra studying be worth it then?

This motivation will get you ahead but it will lead to moments of suffering and it may be a permanent motivation. When you finally do get where you want to be, you'll be so goal oriented you might forget to enjoy it and end up suffering so you can hopefully retire comfortably. When you retire, you're going to be so goal oriented that you either hate your life or go back to work anyway.

This is a reasonable fallback motivation but there are better ones.

Some people, believe it or not, are genuinely curious. This is the most powerful motivation because it ensures you get the win now and later. You get the win now because you get to answer your curiosity. You get the win later because you have that knowledge and those results still helping you get ahead in life.

With all that being said, the simple realization of your own motivation can guide you. Even a superficial and silly motivation like wanting to impress a single person in class can drive you to understand stuff.

When you're aware of your motivation, it's a reminder that you are motivated. It's the kind of thing that gets you to show up when you don't quite feel like it.

When you're about to make the wrong decision, knowing what is motivating you will help you make the right decision.

Naturally, if what is typically motivating you isn't motivating you then maybe it's time to reignite that motivation or even upgrade it a little.

62. Know You Don't Have To

Procrastination is a drain on your grade.

No matter how hard you try and increase that grade you're going to be losing a certain percentage of your grade to it. Until you're willing and able to plug it, you're not going to be able to keep your grades consistent because a consistent result relies on reasonable consistent behavior.

One of the most common causes of procrastination is what I like to think of as a person's "rebellion factor." The "rebellion factor" is a person's natural urge to do stuff that they're not supposed to do. It's the same factor that causes the old sitcom cliché of teen girls falling madly in love with the guys that their father absolutely hates. (And then fall out of love as soon as the father starts to like the guy.)

While a sitcom can't be counted on for a good explanation of life, this is a tendency that holds some truth to it. When a person is told to do something they don't want to do, or are told not to do something they want to do, they often have a part of their brain saying to do the opposite.

Have you ever had a situation like this? I can remember a number of nights when my parents would

come up to my room ask me to go to bed. The funny thing was, even when I originally had planned to go to bed before they asked, I virtually never went as fast as soon as I was asked.

What does this have to do with procrastination? Well... this tendency doesn't only come up with other people.

It might be best to think of yourself as your own little environment. You're not only an individual. You have different aspects of yourself that all want to do different things. To simplify it into something easy to explain, your brain may want to study but your butt might want to stay sitting right there. These are competing interests.

When one part of your brain says, "I need to study," other parts of you are getting rebellious. Instead of being closer to studying, you could just end up farther from studying. This is a common cause of procrastination and it can all be solved with a simple change of perspective.

You don't have to study. In fact, you can't even say with certainty that you "should study." No one is going to chain you down and force you to study (well.... I hope.) You are in control of your body and mind. You can do whatever you want with them. Even if you made the "wrong" decisions, you could still recover from your problems with a little bit of time. Short of a

few major mistakes, most of what you can do wrong, or fail to do, is reversible.

As soon as you instinctively accept that you don't have to study, your brain will be forced to change what it normally thinks. When it's times to study, you can't honestly say that you "need" to study or that you "should" study. Instead you'll find yourself having to say, "I want to study."

You're not studying because you have to. You're not studying because the world will end if you don't do it. You're studying because you think it will put you where you want in life and you want to do it.

Wanting to study doesn't cause any internal rebellion. In fact, it just starts moving and your forces in the same direction.

63. Failure IS An Option

Failure is never all that bad at any level.

It is nothing more than a signal that your current behavior isn't getting you the results that you want. If you take it as such, every time you fail to achieve some particular goal, you'll just be moving yourself closer to achieving it.

In fact, as you get more and more skilled at something, your level of "failure" will just keep on going up. A C student might consider the traditional F as a failure. Plenty of A students get that same negativity when they get a B. Failure is a constantly raising bar will never be off your radar.

Most students see failure in a much more negative connotation.

Students look at their upcoming test and think that failing that one test could ruin everything they worked for. They never have a good case for this. One test grade is almost never valuable enough to skew a student's grades any significant amount. It may cut 2 or 3 points from a student's final class grade but that's nearly negligible. Losing 2 or 3 points will probably not be the reason you don't get into a top notch college. There are people with lower grades than you who get

accepted. Odds are, those 2 or 3 points mean nothing to anyone but you.

Failing a class on the other hand...

Some students (typically not the same students) look at failing a class like the end of the world. They start thinking if they fail a class they're going to ruin their life. A class failure means they might have to spend an extra year or semester in school. Past that, there is rarely any serious consequence. Even in that situation, most students just make it up during a free period. Their lives don't end.

In fact, if you were to flunk out of school and get thrown out on the street, within a year or two you could work your way into a new school or job that is virtually on the same path as you are now. The only reason you wouldn't be able to do this is if you sat around thinking about how much of a failure you are.

Failures happen. Sometimes you'll get that B when you wanted an A. Sometimes you might even completely bomb at subjects. It's okay.

The reason this is important to understand is in the way the average student behaves.

The average student is terrified of failure so they will tend to do what they've always done in the past. If they typically studied 10 hours the day before a test,

they'd continue to do that because, they fear, without it, they might fail. They dig themselves into a rut of thinking if they do everything they same as they've done before, they'll continue to do the same. That is true...

If you keep doing what you're doing, odds are, you're going to keep getting the same of whatever you're currently getting.

That's not a good thing though.

If you're looking to improve yourself, you need to be willing to take risks. You cannot improve or reduce your study routine without a willingness to risk lowering your grade. The only thing you can be pretty confident about is that you're going to end up getting different results than you're used to getting.

That is not comfortable but progress never is. You need to accept that failure is an option. You may try to avoid it but when it comes you can learn from it and change your ways. If you want to improve your life then you have to risk this kind of short term discomfort.

64. Make It Pleasurable

Earlier in this book I suggested that one of the best motivations to have is curiosity.

When you're curious about the stuff you're learning in class, you're not just showing up to class because you feel like it's "good for you," in the same way one might eat their vegetables. When you're curious you're doing this stuff because you actually enjoy the process. A satisfied curiosity is a pleasure in itself. When you want to know more about what you're learning in class, every time you learn more you're going to be getting a little burst of pleasure.

By the time most people get to their class, they've already used a ton of energy just forcing themselves to go in the first place. They end up pushing themselves to show up instead of doing any of the thousands of more enjoyable things they could be doing.

When you're enjoying what you're learning, you're not going to need to pump yourself up to focus. You're not going to need to force yourself to wake up in the morning and go to class. You're not going to need to think too hard about why you want to go. When you enjoy something, you will end up doing it because you just like it.

That does more than just make you feel better. It saves you energy and stress. Every time you have to push yourself to show up, you're draining the strength you have doing something that isn't going to help you come class time. That's energy that you can't use focusing on the words your teacher is saying. That's energy you can't use solving questions on an assignment.

Curiosity is one way that you can learn to enjoy class. By digging up every excuse you have to be curious about class you're going to want to show up. The more questions that you have that need answers, the more your brain is going to be propelling you into your class.

There are other ways to get pleasure out of class.

Some students look at class time like a challenge. When they sit down in class, they're not just showing up to sit through and suffer, they're showing up to dominate on their later tests. They want to learn absolutely everything the teacher is teaching, not because they care personally about the information but because they care about the change it will provide to their test score.

Some students show up to class because they have a teacher that they genuinely enjoy listening to. Some teachers could get an audience of students to show

up with or without credits being given out. When a teacher is interesting, the students might actually enjoy the class getting them to show up.

On a bit of a sillier level: Some students show up because they want the pleasure of perfect attendance. Some students show up because they like talking to their classmates. There are countless pleasurable reasons to go to class. Even having a simple reason to show up can help propel you in the direction you need to go.

In the other direction, some students show up because they don't want to fall behind... As you can probably imagine, there isn't all that much pleasure to be gained through not falling behind. Sure... falling behind is bad and it's less pleasurable than keeping up. This is a powerful motivation that will get students to show up but it will focus that student on the less pleasurable aspects of class. Why live your life to avoid displeasure when you can live it to gain pleasure?

Naturally, not every class will be unbelievably pleasurable. Sometimes this strategy will be harder to implement than at other times. That's why you should have a whole toolbox of different motivations that you can select whenever you need one.

65. Make It Interesting

The end credits would show up on screen and I would be thoroughly confused.

I had a strange habit when I was young. I would be watching some cartoon or something on television and the commercial break would come up. We only had a handful of different stations. During the commercial break I would flip through the stations and look for something interesting. I would occasionally stumble to the public broadcast station and it would be airing some kind of a documentary about some ancient civilization or some biography or something.

I never cared about the documentaries and whatever their subject was but it was usually better than commercials so I'd switch to it with the intention of flipping back to the cartoons later. Then I would get caught up.

Documentaries are rarely made to be pleasurable but they're typically made to be interesting. Once I started watching them I would just zone into the subject and completely forget to switch back to my original station. I would get caught up in all the little details and I'd want to know more. That caused me to sit through hour long documentaries without ever realizing how long I'd been sitting there.

When something is interesting, you don't need to force yourself to focus on it. Your brain will naturally want to focus on it. By finding a subject in class interesting, you're making it so your brain goes on autopilot for focus to some extent.

You cannot change the material your teacher is giving you and you can't change the subject but there is another way to make something interesting. It's just to change your perspective about it.

Somewhere, someone is studying the subject you hate, not because they have to but because they want to study it. It can be easy to dismiss those people as crazies but it's usually just a choice of what people see. Some people look for the negatives of a subject.

In a math class they might think, "this is so repetitive," and hate the class. They could also be thinking, "this is way more consistent than English class. I can actually know when I have the right answer instead of hoping my teacher likes it." Suddenly, something that seems boring becomes a little more interesting.

What's interesting about the subject you hate? Imagine what someone like you that would like about it. There is always something you can use to make a subject interesting to yourself. All you need to do is be willing to accept that. No subject is inherently boring.

Or... as one guy I heard once said, "it's not boring. You're boring." In other words, if you can't make something interesting then you're the one to blame. Someone out there is making that same subject one of the most fascinating subjects in the world. Apparently, that person knows something about interesting that you don't understand.

It may be best to have a natural innate curiosity but by changing your perspective on your classes you can help the curiosity that you have take hold and push you where you want to be in class.

66. Make It A Challenge

It's hard to deal with problems.

I think one of the strangest choices of most school systems is their reliance on "problems." When they create a question for a student to solve, they refer to these as problems that need to be solved. This is a rather strange choice of words though.

Problem's first definition is something to the effect of an "unwelcome occurrence that needs to be dealt with." In life, when you have a problem, you have something you don't want to have in front of you that you're forced to deal with. Schools certainly shouldn't be defining the work they provide as an unwelcome occurrence.

In life, you'll run into plenty of matters that you don't have to solve but you want to solve. People don't consider their morning crossword puzzle a problem. The questions asked on game shows aren't problems. The riddles people ask each other aren't problems. They are challenges.

People seek out challenges. They go out of their way to push themselves into doing things that look difficult. It's the reason people play sports, video games, and virtually anything. People want to see themselves

improve. Challenges can help them feel that process taking place.

But... everyone calls questions in class problems.

That is just making the assumption that these questions are not going to be welcomed by the student. That's just not a reasonable assumption to make because, believe it or not, some people actually enjoy the questions they're being asked in class. (Or at least in some particular class they enjoy.) To them, they may be referred to as problems but the reality is that they are challenges.

Solving problems is something that's unwelcome and necessary. Overcoming challenges is something you want to do.

It is possible to turn the "problems" you're doing into challenges. The first way to do this is by focusing on course and teacher selection because that will play a major role in the way you perceive the work for school. The second way is to focus on the same aspect that I've mentioned repeatedly. Focus on changing your perspective.

If you're going to class because you have to then, of course, this work you're given is a problem. The reality is that this shouldn't be the case based on the other strategies taught in this book. There are better reasons to go to class.

When you're voluntarily going to class, everything the teacher gives you is something you're voluntarily accepting. That makes it a challenge. The teacher is saying, "I don't think you can answer these questions perfectly." You can step up and prove that your teacher is wrong or you can suck it up and settle for whatever. This will provoke your whole emotional backing into the goal of overcoming these challenges because you'll actually have something to lose.

Even in classes that you absolutely hate, have a little bit of pride and try to prove that voice in your head wrong. A part of you may be saying that you're incapable of something but use that angry part that disagrees to overcome these challenges and prove them wrong.

As long as you choose to be there, there is someone or something challenging you. Accept those challenges and you'll end up pushing yourself harder than you ever could have alone.

67. Make It Meaningful

“I’ll never use this,” a student was telling me.

I thought about it for a second and couldn’t get myself to tell the same old lie parents and teachers had told me for years. My whole life parents and teachers told me the information I learned in school would be valuable. Some of it was valuable but the older I got, the more of the information that I was learning went down tangents that haven’t directly improved my life in any way. Only the tangents I happened to go through in life turned out to be useful.

“Probably,” I responded to the student. I still didn’t know where I was going to go with this.

If you want to make something easier to learn, one of the best things you can do is make it meaningful to the student. In some areas this is relatively easy. A medical student doesn’t need too much extra motivation to push through their anatomy courses. It’s kind of a given that the student is going to need all of that information they’re learning in anatomy. They know it. For that reason, the ones that really care about going in that direction tend to have enough meaning to push them through it.

In other areas, it’s not quite as obvious. A student

that's planning to be a math professor probably doesn't care too much about dominating in their english class because a math professor only has to write so well. Past that, it's not all that meaningful for them to learn.

I then decided to try to make the information a challenge for the student, "well... if you don't think you can do it then you should have just told me." He laughed a little when he saw my smile.

"I can do it. I just don't want to. There is no good reason to."

I offered the challenge and he didn't accept. At that point I had to dig a little deeper. I started to prod him a bit about what he was looking for out of life. That's typically where you'll find meaning. He told me that he wanted to be an engineer. I was working with him on an essay he was writing for english class.

That's when I finally admitted, "Yea... maybe you're right. As long as you don't care you're going to sound like an idiot in your emails because they're filled with grammar mistakes."

He laughed and nodded. "Yup..."

He wouldn't have admitted it but I get the impression that idea helped him push through a class he otherwise would have just settled in.

When you find meaning in what you're learning, you may not suddenly be overwhelmed with excitement but it is a baseline that can help you make the right decisions when you're on the edge of making the wrong one. Meaning can get you to hold on to the pencil when you're looking to put it down and start slacking. It can get your mind back on your teacher's lecture when you're not all that interested. It can even convince you to actually show up.

Find a good meaning and doing the minimum comes automatically. You can build up from there.

68. Your Biggest Competition

One of the most powerful challenges that a student can put themselves into is a challenge against what they used to be.

Competition is a challenge in itself. When you're competing for the top spot in class (which I normally wouldn't recommend,) you're going to be willing to do things that you'd otherwise consider was a bit excessive. With that, you're not going to be able to afford to slack off in other areas.

This kind of competition can help, particularly if you're confident you can win. This kind of competition gets less and less useful when you're less competitive at it. One day deciding that you want to be the best student in your math class when you've always struggled in the past is a recipe for disaster.

It may, in the short term, increase the amount you study. You may focus more than you ever had. You may end up doing things that you would have otherwise never followed through with. Despite that, you're going to be competing in a competition that you're likely to lose. Once you lose that competition, you can easily end up thinking, "I gave it my all and still failed, what's the point?" That can hold you back more than any of the improvements you make during

that hardworking period will help.

The one competition that is constantly available and effective is against yourself.

Not all people have the same skills. Not all people have the same resources. Not everyone has learned the same stuff in the past. That makes all exterior competition a bit of a crap shoot. You're just gambling. You may be able to find healthy competition at times but you can't always count on it.

When you're competing against yourself you know that the competition is going to be fair. It's not a losing battle as long as you're willing and able to put in the effort. No matter how good you get, you'll always end up with more ways to improve. In the end, as long as you put some effort in, you're probably going to win. You're never going to win because your competition screwed up.

This competition is much less biologically stimulating than the traditional approach. It is something that needs a constant nurturing to fully appreciate. Being competitive with a person willing to trash talk you will push you harder than the competition with yourself but that kind of competition is unpredictable. Competition with yourself is predictable.

Decide to compete with yourself. One of the most common ways of doing this is by setting specific goals

with specific deadlines. If you achieve that goal then you win. If you fail to achieve that goal, as long as you got closer than you were, you still win. If you fail to achieve that goal but you didn't improve in any way then you may fail. Then again, if you learn a lesson about why you didn't get closer to your goal then you probably still win.

Competition is good. The most consistent competition you can have to motivate yourself is a competition against what you used to be.

69. Find Your Hook

In this section I've discussed a number of potential hooks. Hooks are aspects of class that help you put in the effort without the stress of forcing yourself to do it.

One of those hooks is making it pleasurable. If you can make going to class enjoyable then you don't need to worry about forcing yourself to go because going will be natural. You'll want to go.

Another one of those hooks is making it interesting. By making a subject interesting to you it will allow you to focus consistently based on curiosity about the subject.

Another hook is making information meaningful to you. If you can prove information is meaningful to you then you'll be able to put the minimum required effort in with less forceful effort and more natural habits.

Another hook was making it a challenge. People hate problems but love challenges. Find the challenges instead of the problems and you'll want to do more for class.

These are all just new ways to improve your ability to stay motivated during different periods of your schooling and life. The goal is to have the tools to pick

and choose the best hook for any particular situation.

There are times when you won't be able to find a good reason a class is meaningful. That doesn't mean you just give up and accept it as a class to not care about. It's time to start looking deeper in the other areas for your motivation. Is it interesting? Is it challenging? Is it pleasurable?

No? Well... don't stop there. This is just a small list of the potential reasons you might get motivated in a class. To some extent all of these interact with each other intimately but they diverge in countless directions that might be helpful in finding your own personal motivations.

Perhaps you can find a class funny if you look at it right. This is particularly good for classes when you disagree excessively with the teacher. You may hate the teacher and subject but if you can constantly get a kick out of the silly things you think they're saying, you'll tend to do better in that class (as long as you're not insulting the teacher at the same time. That could easily cost you any points you earn from finding it funny.)

Even if you don't find your own separate hook, there are countless ways you can find a new way to make one of these hooks find something to catch. I heard one story where a student that hated math decided to do math tutoring for younger students. She ended up

making money off the math skills she had. After that, she was able to improve her own math scores notably. She had an excuse to get better and took it.

Find a hook or create something for one of these hooks to latch onto. This is the key to consistent motivation without the traditional idea of disciplining yourself into compliance. It can help you do what you need to do without wasting your energy on shoving it down your own throat.

Understanding

In years of giving study advice I would have typically given was different advice than what I'm going to recommend now. That's because having a study routine is different than seeking to reduce or eliminate it completely. Your strategies have to change to adapt.

Before getting to that, you need to understand the difference between memorization and understanding. Memorization is about being able to recite facts when you need them. Understanding is more about your ability to creatively think about the information you're trying to learn.

Memorization is a predictable process. Scientists have been able to objectively study it extensively. The ways to do it are well understood. These are consistent strategies that provide relatively guaranteed results when you use them right.

Understanding is a little more complicated and a whole lot less predictable. Some people will instinctively think creatively about certain subjects within minutes of learning it. Others will take hours of exposure to it before they start to think in that way. It's about factors that are virtually impossible to objectively study. For that reason, relatively little is understood about how to achieve it.

(In reality, this is probably a rather hazy border between memorization and understanding. Usually a certain amount of each is required to do well in school. Looking at them separately can help simplify dealing with them.)

Typically, I would recommend a short consistent study routine. In that short consistent study routine you would emphasize the information that you can memorize. There is little reason to worry about the traditional idea of understanding information because understanding is unpredictable. You can waste your whole study session trying to understand or you can spend your whole study session learning information that will directly help you when the test comes.

This is ideal when you're trying to maximize the value of a short study session. If you are planning on having a short study session, this is the most valuable area you could be investing your energy in.

Typically, understanding will help more on the test but you need to consider how difficult it is to get that understanding compared to the difficulty of memorizing sets of information. One of the hardest parts of developing a no-study routine is finding a way to understand instead of memorize. Any idiot can memorize lists of information if they have the right tools. Understanding concept after concept is significantly more challenging without that extra

predictable time investment.

If you're looking to eliminate studying completely though, you need to give up on the idea of memorizing all the information you need for class. Class time isn't helpful to memorize information. Class time can be helpful for understanding information. That means you need to emphasize the importance of understanding in your routine.

This usually relies on a whole list of other factors coming together. Until you have all the aspects of your grade pushing in the same direction, you're not going to be able to consistently understand information by only investing your class and assignment time. If you're not focused, you probably can't do it. If you're not asking the right questions, you probably can't do it. If you're not prioritizing information right, you probably can't do it.

You need to get all these factors working for you. When you do, information will begin to stick better than you're used to. Once you have all those factors, following these steps will get you a strong understanding of your subjects with less effort.

70. Oversimplify But Under-Believe

A big part of really understanding something is to be wrong about it.

This might sound a little silly but let me explain.

In virtually every subject, the longer you study it, the more you begin to realize the original ideas you learned were wrong (or at least dramatically simplified or misunderstood.) When you dig really deep into a subject, you might even get to the point where you realize the mainstream perception of the subject is wrong.

To understand something, most people have to start by thinking about it incorrectly. People naturally think towards patterns but very few of the things you learn about in life are going to be perfect patterns. Most of the time, that's not much of a problem.

Imagine an earlier math class where you were told about the number pi equaling "3.14". At the time the teacher probably gave you a quick caveat that it's not exactly "3.14". For class though, no teacher would get upset if you get the same answer as assuming pi is "3.14". That number is a dramatic simplification of a number that is, for all practical purposes, never ending. If someone asked you what pi equaled in

class though, until later years, the teacher would virtually always say you're right with a simplification of the number.

Now imagine your teacher made you understand the true depth of pi going on for infinity. Can you imagine any work actually getting done? Does the full value of pi really have practical value to a 12 year old student trying to solve the size of a theoretical circle?

Simplifications are one of the most powerful ways to understand information.

When you find something that looks like a pattern, don't be too hesitant to accept it as such. Even accepting it as a pattern with an exception can help you remember.

Once you start finding potential patterns, you can't overestimate your own confidence in these patterns. Most things in life don't follow exact patterns that are discernible in class or life. Whenever you're learning a potential pattern you should use it to make better guesses but the doubt it every step of the way. As soon as the pattern stops being useful, you have to change it.

Understanding is often a matter of finding incorrect patterns. You can find these incorrect patterns and still understand that they're probably incorrect. This is a natural process but by doing it intentionally you can

actually watch closely enough to doubt yourself when you're doing it. That is where the best of the value starts kicking in.

When you're just paying attention and trying to stumble into understanding you could easily mistake a curious coincidence for some kind of epiphany. When you're actually stepping through this pattern seeking process intentionally you can actively catch your own ignorance through the process.

You end up getting the better grades of oversimplifying information without the risk of going too far down an illogical path.

71. Metaphors Work

When you can't find an obvious pattern to make the information you're learning more accessible, it can often help to connect that information through metaphors. This isn't the most consistently valuable process but it can be particularly helpful if you have a few conditions met.

As with working with patterns, it's usually better to build a slightly ignorant metaphor that can help you remember the information and link it properly than it is to try and start from scratch. This allows you to connect something that you've already taken the time to learn and connect it with something that you haven't quite learned yet.

For example, you might think of World War II history in terms of World War I history (or vice-versa.) This can give you a quick and dirty look at who participated and on which side. It can give you a very rough idea of the problems each country was facing. (Germany was still surrounded on both sides. America was still plenty far away to ignore what was going on.) Just realizing the connection between these wars allows you to guess reasonably accurately at everything.

Naturally, World War II is not World War I. The facts will not line up perfectly.

When you're working with metaphors, you know you're working with imperfect comparisons. When the comparisons are imperfect, what you have to focus on changes. If you're just learning about World War I, you will have piles of new facts to learn. If you're learning about World War I using information you learned from World War II then you'll get to use what you already know and focus most of your energy on the exceptions. Instead of remembering a long list of facts you can remember a slightly shorter list of exceptions.

The quantity alone is a good thing but it's even better than that. Facts are like knowledge floating out in space. The exceptions are facts that are linked to previous information that you already learned. You end up with a shorter list of things to learn and an instant link to learn them from.

Using metaphors is most useful when the following facts are met:

First of all, you want to know a reasonable amount of information on both subjects. You shouldn't start worrying about metaphors until you've really dugged into the subject. You might think in terms of small metaphors while you're learning it but hesitate before making too many guesses at what a good metaphor might be.

When you find a potential metaphor, you're going to want one of two scenarios.

One: The information is closely linked to one another and tends to match in important areas more than it doesn't match. By important areas, I'm referring to the areas that will be tested. Most subjects aren't all that similar but tests can make them seem similar based on the kinds of questions that get asked.

When the information is closely linked, you can much more effectively make educated guesses about the information you don't know.

Two: The information is wildly disconnected from each other. An example of this is making a pro sports metaphor related to the European union. Sport teams don't start wars and control currencies. These subjects are so dramatically different that the fact that this is a metaphor should be blatantly obvious.

When the information isn't so closely linked, you need to be careful making too many guesses about information you don't know. In some ways, like the similarities between human natures, it could end up working out but these metaphors work best as a little bit of a memory tool. They can't help improve your ability to guess all that much.

By learning to use metaphors you'll be getting the same advantages of pattern recognition while just

needing something to link to the information that you're looking to learn.

72. Fight Acceptance

One of the most powerful ideas that you can use to improve your understanding of a subject is doubt.

Whenever you think that you've fully understood a subject, you're likely going to find out you're wrong. How you respond when you start to realize you might be wrong is one of the greatest predictors of whether or not you're going to keep gaining understanding. If you are stuck on the idea that what you learned is completely and without a doubt, right, you're constantly going to be disappointing yourself. Instead, it's better to have a constant skepticism about what you're learning.

Skepticism is a bit of a shovel you can use to dig up what you're looking to understand better. By going through what you're trying to learn with skepticism you naturally dig deeper into the subject to find evidence to disprove claims made. This is an automatic form of curiosity.

As discussed before, you also need to have some doubt in the patterns and metaphors that you're using to understand the information. These patterns and metaphors aren't the information you're learning, they're just tools to help temporarily as you're trying to learn the information.

Skeptical people tend to automatically produce more and better questions. It's a bit of an "adversarial" approach to understanding. By digging into why something isn't wrong, it exposes you to all kinds of reasons why it's right.

Does that mean you should bombard your teacher with these questions? Probably not and definitely not during class. People don't like responding to this kind of reasoning. It comes off in the same way a child asking "why" two-hundred times in a row does. It's irritating. Heck, Socrates gets killed for his question asking. I vote you don't go trying to get yourself killed.

Most of these questions don't need answers. If a question is really digging at you then ask or look it up but the vast majority of these questions can go unanswered. Just having these questions is an instant link to the knowledge you're learning. The questions make the facts and the problem more memorable.

As soon as you start accepting everything your teacher says as fact you're going to be fighting to get the same level of focus as a student critically doubting everything the teacher says.

Anyway, education is not about the recitation of facts. You can google this stuff and learn it in 30 seconds. Education, or at least the education that I value, is about improving the way you think and solve

problems. It's the kind of thinking that makes you interesting and dangerous to the established ideas.

Don't just settle for learning what the teachers tell you to learn and accepting it. Learn what your teachers tell you and do everything you can do prove them wrong. (If only to yourself.) This will improve your memory and your ability to think critically about the subject. That will improve your grades and the enjoyment you get out of the class.

73. Bikeshedding

Most people focus on the trivial aspects of what they're supposed to be worrying about.

The story typically told to describe this phenomenon is about a committee that was established to approve the building of a nuclear power plant. That committee spent the vast majority of its time on minor details such as the building of a bike shed on the property. It spent virtually none of its time thinking of the dramatic and life threatening concerns like the reactors.

People have a tendency to think about the things that they think they have a contribution to make with. The average person feels like they know absolutely nothing about building a nuclear power plant. They're willing to assume the engineer in charge of that knows best. When it comes to something as trivial as a bike shed, every person thinks they can make a contribution.

It tends to go farther than that though. People dramatically overestimate how much they understand about building a bikeshed. They could downright argue with an engineer over the subject.

People also dramatically underestimate how much they understand about building a nuclear power plant.

They could have hired a complete bozo to build the plant but most people wouldn't ask enough questions to actually prove it. But... fortunately... that bike shed will hold up well.

Most people focus on the trivial aspects of any subject. Trying to understand a subject requires digging deeper than just working in those areas. It requires finding the root issues to deal with. You can't understand anything until you deal with the basics.

For example, if you were trying to understand World War I and couldn't talk at all about diplomacy then you're going to be fighting an uphill battle. Every decision to join the war was related to it. That's kind of an obvious example. Most aren't quite as obvious.

In math class, you can misunderstand basic algebra but still get all the way to calculus. By that point, you might think you have a problem with Calculus because you keep getting the wrong answers. The real problem could be the base knowledge that you're expected to have already figured out.

Don't waste your time on the trivial until you've dealt with the important stuff.

You know dramatically more about the important stuff than you give yourself credit for. What seems like it's related to what you're currently learning may be something significantly deeper. Calculus isn't

necessarily difficult. In fact, if explained in terms less related to algebra, you might instinctively get it. You might even be able to solve problems based on it leaving the math to someone else.

No subject is quite as complicated as it looks. Sure... you shouldn't go out there building nuclear power plants without the proper knowledge but, quite frankly, you could probably convince a committee that you know what you're talking about.

You could say something simple like: "Yea... we're going to need a thick layer of concrete with the reactor. There is going to have to be some carefully built rooms around it with extra layers to protect the scientists and engineers keeping a constant eye on it." And everyone in the committee will nod and maybe someone will ask some silly question about the bike shed.

Naturally... it's not quite that simple but from my experience, it's more true than you'd like to believe.

74. Layers Of Understanding

Understanding is never complete. No matter how deep you dig into a subject, there is always going to be more related to it. It can be thought of as if there are different layers of understanding.

You can think of the top layer of understanding like the encyclopedia entry on the subject. (Or the top section of a Wikipedia article.) In that section you'll find all the most important top layer facts. It will tell you dates, events and people that are most important to understanding the subject. You'll have a general idea of the story behind the subject. Your time won't be wasted on too many of the details but you'll know where the details need to get filled in.

The next layer of understanding might be similar to the full page of a Wikipedia article. You'll get tons of details on the subject. If you were being tested on the subject, and didn't have access to better and more closely related study materials, this would be a good area to focus most of your time.

The next layer of understanding might come from the sources in the Wikipedia article or books on the subject. This layer of understanding is generally too broad to study for any test.

It can be good for thoroughly understanding a subject though. It can also help to read smaller sections related to specific information you are struggling to understand. This is a layer usually not required to do well in a class.

The layer after that might be original sources and even more obscure books on the subject. This could include diary entries from people that actually participated in the information. This could be news articles and editorials that were published around that time. This could include countless details. This is the layer of understanding that most experts in a subject end up at.

The last layer of understanding, in my opinion, is the ability to change the way people think about the subject. This would tend to only include a tiny fraction of people. You might include Einstein for flipping everything everyone thought they knew upside down. You might also include quality revisionist historians. You might include Darwin. This is an exclusive category of understanding that's well beyond the scope of most students just looking to pass their class.

You want to focus most of your energy on learning a subject one layer at a time. For classes sake, the best direction is from top to bottom. You should start with a base summary of everything you need to know. Once you think you understand that you can move onto the

next layer. Without that first layer, you'll end up struggling through any test you take. That process repeats for the next layer. Most of the time, that's all you'll need for class. It can help to dig a little bit into one layer deeper though.

One of the key things you need to learn to appreciate the value of these layers is the ability to distinguish the layers from one another in a form that's not expertly split. Creating that split yourself can lead to a number of challenges.

75. Layer Categorization

Layer categorization is a complicated subject. Subjects aren't written to help categorize information based on which layer of understanding the facts are related to. Usually, textbooks are just long lists of facts split into convenient categories for the writer and teacher. In the first sections you can get bombarded with almost completely irrelevant facts. By the time you learn them all it might already be test time. Then... you also need to factor in the teacher's style, syllabus, assignments, and test prep material.

You might have heard this idea before. When you're reading a textbook, read the headlines first. Then go through and read all the actual information. This is a strategy that's using a very basic method to try and categorize the layers of information. It's assuming the headlines are the most important aspects of the information and the body of the sections is the extra information.

I'm not a fan of this method for a couple reasons. First of all, it's putting too much emphasis on the textbook. It's better to use a resource the teacher wrote themselves. Second, it's taking some 20-30 lines of information for the first layer and thousands of lines for the second layer. This is a horrible balance that isn't all that much easier to learn.

Categorizing information should be highly focused on information the teacher hands out themselves. The farther you get from stuff your teacher wrote specifically for your class, the farther you're going to get from useful material.

Information categorization will come down to some basic concepts.

In the top layer you'll see important names, dates, events, and concepts. On a later layer you'll start to see less significant names, dates, events, and concepts. Understanding what is significant is one of the most challenging aspects. It's usually best learned through experience.

Normally, I wouldn't recommend spending your time with this process but the following can be a good exercise for learning how to categorize information. Pull out an old assignment or study guide your teacher gave you and get a couple different colored highlighters. Use one of them to highlight top layer information (information that seems fundamental for understanding the subject.) Use the other color to highlight lower layered information. After you highlighted a large section of the assignment, start to compare each color.

If you were doing this on a study guide you should expect only 10-20% of the page to be highlighted in

the color of top layer information. On assignments, you'll typically see a smaller percentage. If you're noticing a different balance then you may be right but it may be a sign that you should actually try comparing that information to an encyclopedia entry and seeing where that information actually comes up. If it's in the summary it's in the top layer. If it's buried then it probably belongs in a lower layer.

This isn't an exact science and I definitely don't recommend wasting your time highlighting everything you get but it's a skill that can be improved over time. Once you're able to properly categorize information, prioritizing what you're learning becomes automatic.

76. Progression

Distinguishing the proper layers of understanding required for any subject is one of the important progressions to keep track of for your classes.

Some things should be learned before other things. Trying to learn certain things out of order makes learning them harder than it has to be. Trying to dig into the details of any particular subject is more difficult when you don't already have a general idea of the full story. It's like you're trying to color in a drawing without the lines on the outside. You can start coloring it in but once those lines come in you're not going to be coloring only within them. It makes a mess of the situation.

Learning the details before you have a general outline of the subject is also more difficult because you have no context to remember those details. Without that starting base of knowledge, it's hard to link up what you're learning to fit the actual context of the situation. The more you know about a subject, the easier it is to learn more about it and remember it.

This is the layering progression.

Another progression that you will need to worry about is based on the logic of certain lessons.

Math offers some of the most clear examples of this. Everything is taught in a deliberate order to increase the chances the student will be able to follow the next lesson. Children are taught basic addition and subtraction first. Later they learn multiplication and division. It could be possible to understand multiplication and division before addition and subtraction but the logical leap for the student would be greater. It's easier and more consistent to teach information progressively.

Finding a logical progression for learning a subject is difficult. The ideal way to find it is to have a quality teacher to guide you. Since you can't always count on that from your teachers in school, this is an area where having external resources like books or tutors can give you a bit of an edge.

One of the most important lessons to take from watching for the correct progression is to start paying attention to when this isn't taking place very well. If you find yourself running into material that is completely not clicking for you, this is one likely problem area. If you find yourself struggling to an unusual degree then it may be worth taking the time to find some extra alternative resource to help you get started on a better progression through the subject.

This is a situation that isn't too common. Most subjects are taught in a way that's not too bad of a

progression for the average student. It's usually only going to be a problem when a teacher is teaching atypically. If you're running into this problem more than once every few years that it's probably something else.

This is one of those concepts that can really beat you up when you're not looking out for it. You may never have the perfect progression and, for most students, there isn't all that much that can be done about it. It still helps to know when you're in a bad spot so you can utilize your time and resources better to deal with it.

77. Pattern Recognition

Pattern recognition is a factor that's been discussed throughout this book a few times already.

Most of understanding is pattern recognition. When you can recognize patterns, you can create new and reasonable assumptions based on those patterns. This is the difference between just memorizing information that you might need and actually being able to use that information to reach new conclusions.

Recognizing patterns, to some extent, is biological. It is a big factor when it comes to a person's measurable IQ. People with particularly high IQs tend to be very skilled with it. Considering how heritable IQ scores are, this can be a difficult to control factor. Some people are born particular gifted while others will tend to struggle.

Despite that, you have a certain amount of control over how these factors actually alter your day to day life. A person that's particularly gifted at pattern recognition can fail to recognize a pattern that a person more practiced and aware can notice. In fact, people that are naturally poor at pattern recognition may overcompensate for their poor genes and end up well ahead of the average person.

Here's an analogy that could help: A person that has heart disease in their family history may be more likely to die of heart disease. It could do the opposite if someone is aware of it. Their awareness of their family history could provoke them into working out and eating right. That could make them less likely to get heart disease because of their genes.

Someone once told me all the rich people he knows are dumb. I laughed and said, "That's probably because they actually had something to prove."

So... maybe you're not gifted. Maybe you are. You still have control over how you take advantage of the cards you've been given. You can give up or you can work to improve your situation.

Pattern recognition can be improved with practice to some extent. Maybe "brain games" make claims that they're capable of making this change. I'm hesitant to agree that any repeatable activity could provide an applicable improvement to pattern recognition but I have no doubt that practicing unique pattern recognition tasks consistently will.

Awareness is even more important. When you're looking at information, you should be looking for some kind of a pattern. Most of the time you'll be wrong. Most of the time the patterns you do find will be irrelevant but this awareness will still be there when you actually need to find a pattern. Awareness in itself

can out play an important role.

Once you find these patterns, as mentioned before, you also need an awareness of when a pattern could just be noise instead of a signal. Sometimes a pattern is just a silly coincidence. This is an area that's fundamental to really appreciating the use of patterns.

Pattern recognition may not be completely under your control but you can't completely ignore it as a factor. The more you practice using it and the more you're aware of the importance of finding patterns, the better you're going to be able to understand information.

78. Deep Versus Superficial

Understanding can be thought of in layers but those layers should not be confused with this following factor. Some knowledge about a subject is deeply related to the subject. Other knowledge is more superficial.

Superficial knowledge about a subject is good for consistent study routines. It's the kind of information made mostly to be memorized. It has little practical value beyond itself. This could be thought of as obscure dates and names. This information offers little extra understanding to appreciate in relation to the subject.

Deeper knowledge about a subject is more intrinsically related to the subject you're studying. It's information that holds more connections with the original subject. This information is near the center of the subject with dramatically more links to other aspects of it. This information is often a concept or idea but it can include specific and important names and dates.

For example, if we were talking about the United States Civil War, Abraham Lincoln would be considered a deeper knowledge than John Breckenridge (the other guy in the election he won.)

Abraham Lincoln is intimately related to the subject. He has links to the decision to secede by the states. He decided to push for the war. He had a huge impact of the strategies used and even controlled journalists through threats of prison time. He is a major player in the story.

Now... poor old John Breckenridge may play an interesting What-If scenario but in reality, his impact on what happened was negligible especially compared to Abraham Lincoln.

Of course, based on the subject of discussion, the depth of each individual factor would change dramatically. If the subject happened to be their election then both the men would have played a nearly equal role. They would have nearly equal depth in the subject.

If you set out to memorize facts then you'd obviously want to focus your energy on the deeper knowledge about a subject. The more intimately related a piece of information is to the subject, the more likely you'll find it on a test related to that subject. When you're looking to understand a subject, you shouldn't think too much differently.

The most important information you should focus on understanding is the most intimately related information. The more often you see a name or subject being brought up, the more likely that

information is going to be important. If you're looking to reduce your study routine or eliminate it completely, you need to get good at zeroing in on this heavily cited information.

This is the kind of information that will become particularly important in the next section of this book. The farther away from the center of a subject a piece of information is, the harder it becomes to use that information for the creation of new ideas. A good part of many classes is your ability to take the limited knowledge you have and expand on that to create something your teacher thinks is worth a good grade.

A great knowledge and understanding of obscure subjects only comes in handy once in awhile. The broader subjects come in handy all the time.

Writing

When you know how to write in a way that teachers find appealing, you're setting yourself up for a relatively easy time in class. Writing plays a fundamental role in almost every single subject. In science class you'll need to write science reports. In history class you'll need to write essays on history. The only class that rarely requires the skill of writing well is math. Everything else usually leaves great opportunities to improve your grade through writing better.

When a teacher is reading a student's response to a question, they are forced to interpret that answer using the student's ability to write. I've read tons of essays from really smart people that end up making the writer sound like a bit of a fool. They have the required ideas to produce something really good but they end up not having the experience or skill to turn that into something a teacher reading thirty papers or more will appreciate.

One of the most depressing things I watch in students I work with is their really good ideas not getting the treatment that they deserve.

Readers of the blog have heard this story a few times already but for everyone else I'll give it a quick

overview.

For a period in college, I made a part time career writing essays for other students. They would offer me a certain sum of money and I'd produce a paper ("for reference only" I'd tell them rolling my eyes.) that would get them a high grade. I ended up writing countless papers for classes that I never even took myself. I'll go over how I could do that later. One of the great things about this business (from a purely business perspective) is that once the students hired me once, I was virtually guaranteed future business.

The students would hand in an absolutely awesome paper that blew the teachers away. Then... of course... they'd have to live up to that standard on their next paper. That's where they ended up needing my help again. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these students never learned what they should have learned when it came to writing. It would have taken them weeks of editing and revising to produce a quality piece of writing that wouldn't make it look like they were slacking in comparison to "their" old one.

The reality for me was different. I could write an A+ multiple thousand word essay in a few hours pretty consistently. Not only that but I rarely did any significant amount of preparation or research on the subject. Most of my high grades were plain old winging it. I'm not saying this to impress anyone. I'm saying it to impress upon you something fundamental

to most good writers.

Once you get good at writing, writing becomes a second nature. It's easy. It makes everything you do easier. It allows you to focus on subjects and avoid subjects inconspicuously. It allows you to control the flow of the conversation right where you're hoping that it will end up going. Good writers tend to do this consistently without too much effort.

In fact, one of your greatest handicaps when you learn to write well is your own typing speed. You're going to catch yourself not typing fast enough to keep up with your ideas.

Learning to write effectively opens up doors that make almost everything in school dramatically easier.

79. How To Write Something You Know Nothing About

Writing skills are highly versatile.

Writing skills can help you convince the teacher you know the correct answer when you actually know the correct answer. By answering an essay or short answer questions with a poorly written response, the teacher could easily misinterpret your correct answers for non-answers or a partial answers.

Writing skills can help you convince the teacher you know the correct answer when you don't actually know the correct answer. By providing a well written answer highly related to the question, many teachers will let your answer slide by as correct. At the very least, most teachers will provide a good chunk of credit for a quality response.

As mentioned before, writing skills are important for almost every class you participate in. If you need to write complete sentences then you're likely to benefit your grade by improving your ability to write.

Writing skills dramatically speed up everything you do related to these writing related classes. When you're better at writing, you produce better quality in less time. That means you have more time for doing the

things that you enjoy.

Writing skills help with reading skills. There is an old phrase the writing skills require a person read a lot. I agree with that to some extent but it goes both ways. When you spend your energy improving your writing ability, you are going to end up improving your ability to read, and more importantly, interpret other writers better. This is useful for every single class you take.

This is just the start of the different ways that writing skills can be used to improve your grade. Writing ability is fundamental to virtually everything that you end up doing for class (and life.) It's a tool that can be used to turn tough situations into easier ones.

The funny thing about writing is that it's probably not about what you think. Writing has almost nothing to do with vocabulary. Writing is about ideas. Vocabulary can help but at a certain point it also hinders. Writing is about providing information in a way that readers find appealing. It doesn't have to be stuffy and boring. Virtually everything you write can be in your own preferred voice.

Writing skills are deeply related to entertainment. When you're writing something, you shouldn't be trying to impress the reader. You shouldn't be trying to say what they want. You shouldn't be trying to sound smart. Your goal should often be focused on entertaining the reader.

Does that mean bombs and lots of sex scenes? No... (well not usually) I mean entertaining in a different way. You are looking to turn the teacher's requirements into something that makes your work stand out from everyone else's paper. You do that by making the paper into something that you actually would want to read.

Your english teacher may disagree with this if directly asked but they'd virtually always agree when they see it in practice. A highly skilled writer is a writer than can entertain their readers while meeting their own goals without writing poorly enough for it to be disruptive. (This may not be ideal for a technical writing assignment but virtually all of school isn't technical.)

In short, write with reasonable grammar. Follow the assignment at least to the minimum. Make it something someone actually wants to read. If you have any doubt, after you finish, ask how anxious are you to read it? If you're dreading it then you're probably off track.

80. Read More

You've probably heard this idea before. If you're looking to become a better writer then one of the easiest ways is to read more. That doesn't necessarily mean it's time to pick up the classics (or worse, your textbook) and start staring down the pages hoping to figure something out.

The classic reason that people would recommend reading to improve your writing ability is the idea that a good reader has a better vocabulary. The simple act of reading more increases your exposure to new words. There is some truth to this concept but I think it's a bit exaggerated.

When you're young, reading can dramatically help your ability to write but the older you get, the less valuable reading becomes because your vocabulary doesn't have as many words to learn. Sure, there are plenty of words that you don't know but the older you get, the more obscure and pointless the words you end up learning become. As a 10 year old, there is probably some great vocabulary related reasons to read. When you're pushing to the college years, there is still some value but it's much less pronounced.

The real value to reading is learning what you actually find enjoyable to read.

When you end up spending your reading time on textbooks or classics that don't interest you, you may end up with a slightly stronger vocabulary but you're risking becoming a much worse writer when it comes to your grades. Sure... knowing how to write a textbook has value but teachers do not grade textbook style papers as well as something they actually enjoy.

Your teacher is not a machine designed to grade everything according to some perfect pattern. The more you attempt to create something formulaic, like a textbook, the more your teacher is going to think about anything but your work while reading it. That does not provoke teachers into giving you extra points.

When you start reading you get the chance to experience different writing styles. There is some variation in styles that play some role but you'll notice that most good writing is pretty well agreed upon by the people willing to invest their time into it. Different kinds of people are looking for different kinds of writing but most people enjoy certain other styles of writing.

You want to find authors with voices that you find appealing and you know other people find appealing. When you find an author like that, you will probably learn some vocabulary. You'll probably learn some

grammar. Most importantly, you'll learn how writers grab you and pull you into their writing.

When you can pull a reader into your writing, you're dramatically more likely to gain their favor. Your number one challenge is not impressing them. The teacher has thousands of words to read. Your goal needs to be finding a way to actually make them notice your paper in relationship to the other papers (and preferably for the right reasons.)

What is it that you actually enjoy reading? Try to figure out why. You're probably not all that different than most people.

81. Style Over Substance

In most classes, you want to worry about style before you start worrying about the substance of your work. The more scientific the course, the less you should worry about style. If you're writing a science report then style plays a minor role. If you're writing a history paper, style plays a reasonable role. If you're writing a creative writing assignment then you can virtually ignore making any serious and obvious point with your writing.

Another way to think about it is like this. Style is more important than substance in any class that you can get away with it. In a science report, you can't really make everything up without coming off terribly. There is hardly any room for anecdotes or anything unusual. In history, there is a little room for creative license within the facts of history. Facts get to be interpreted a little. In creative writing, you could write just about anything and find some good logical reason for it. It's pure style.

When you're trying to write a heavily stylistic paper, your top priority should be finding a hook for whatever you're writing. A hook is something that makes people actually want to read whatever it is you're writing. Ideally, it's something that will make you actually want to read what you wrote afterwards.

One way to make a hook is to argue something controversial. By saying something out of the usual conversation, you are taking an interesting stand. As long as you have a mediocre argument backing it up, you'll be able to get farther with less effort. Naturally, don't go too controversial. If your teacher is downright offended or worried then you've gone way too far. The goal is to surprise them. Not to get yourself kicked out of class.

Another way is to make unusually simple or complex idea out of the opposite. One of my high scoring essays I wrote for someone (and one of my favorites) is a 4 page essay about a four line long poem. The ideas were rather mediocre but it was well written and the whole time I was writing it I was excited about the prospect. That ended up making the quality of the writing dramatically better.

The opposite of that is taking a big concept and narrowing it down to a simple explanation. You might argue the most influential man of the 1900's was Gavrilo Princip. He assassinated Franz Ferdinand and arguable caused World War I. That, arguably, caused Russia to go communist, World War II, the holocaust, all kinds of small wars, the cold war, most of the troubles in the middle east, and a ton more. The idea that one bullet can completely flip the world upside down is a hook.

Another kind of hook is to leave a fundamental question at the end of your story but leave a much less interesting (but seemingly important) question answered. People love when you have a supposed “secret” purpose that’s not very well hidden in the story. By leaving a major question unanswered you can make the teacher watch for it. When the teacher sees it, they’ll grade you higher.

These kinds of stylistic choices should come before the actual depth of your ideas. You can always find ideas to agree with your style if you’re willing to look. If you already have a factual argument decided then you should dig deep to find a really good hook for it.

After the hook is decided, I’d usually recommend writing some kind of an outline. Even a 5 sentence outline with one sentence per major point (intro, point 1, point 2, point 3, conclusion) works for most traditional style essays. Having just that simple an outline will help you when you’re working your way through it. By having a general idea where you’re going, you’re much more likely to get there when you want.

Some students even get excited to write their work around this point. This may be unusual but keep an eye out for any sense of enjoyment out of the process. When you actually get even a bit of pleasure from it, you’re probably headed in the right direction.

82. Simplify Complex Language

“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name,” is a quote attributed to Confucius. I happen to find it a bit deceptive in its simplicity. It’s hard to say whether I agree or disagree without knowing the context of the quote but it’s a fun place to start.

This quote can be taken as a bit of a counter argument to my following point.

Language isn’t only about precision.

Have you ever met a person that speaks in ridiculously complex words? They talk as if they’re an SAT prep test. They sound impressive but when you actually dig into what they’re saying, it’s deceptively simple. I’ve discussed this with a friend of mine that uses this kind of language. He told me it was about increasing the precision of his language.

Precision is important. This is where I think the quote comes in well. When you’re discussing something, particularly something that makes you uncomfortable, you can be tempted to use less precise language. Sometimes you want to hide your own ignorance and other times you might just be trying to prevent someone from getting offended. Precise language

means closer to what you're trying to say. This can solve problems significantly faster.

That being said, precision isn't everything.

Precision can also be used as an excuse to obfuscate the meaning of your sentence.

(Obfuscate: To Obscure. Yes. That was a joke to make my point.)

When you're using words that the person you're talking to is less likely to understand, you may improve the precision of your sentence but you're lowering the precision of the conversation in general. Both parties of a conversation need to understand a word to have it improve the precision of the conversation. Using obscure words in day to day conversation with the average person may make you feel smart but everyone else is too busy trying to decode your messages.

Look at your textbooks or class material from this perspective. How much of what you read increases your understanding of what you're learning and how much of it just obscures it?

Good resources are able to use minimally precise words to make very precise points. Minimally precise words allow you to actually follow along farther than just the words being said. They allow you to dig into

the meaning. Your goal isn't to make your writing as difficult to read as possible. It's to make your writing as easy to read as possible while staying accurate.

Have you ever heard the idea that you don't understand something unless you can explain it to a five year old? That's a little bit of a simplification but that's the direction you should be thinking towards. The more simply you can explain something, the more you understand it yourself.

Your teacher will not be too fooled by a thesaurus. There may be good reasons at specific times to increase the complexity of your language but more often than not, you want to idiot-proof your work.

The harder it is for your teacher to read, the more likely they're going to blame you for it. When you're writing something there are more important factors than using impressive words. Impressive words often become more of a distraction than a benefit.

So... perhaps using the right word is the beginning of wisdom but it's certainly not the end.

Goals

People talk a lot about goals.

I tend to dislike the concepts that most people talk about. I assume the ideas that most people talk about are just what a person needs to end up like most people. If you're reading this book (and got this far) I'm willing to bet that you don't want to be like "most people." Most people settle for mediocre. Most people give up doing something that actually would make them happy. Most people don't get extraordinary grades and most people spend too much time to get the grades they get.

Be like most people? I'll pass.

I'm not going to give up on something just because most people think it's a good idea though. The funny thing about many of these ideas that people talk about is that most people never actually follow through anyway.

I know plenty of people who "set goals" but what they define as setting goals is hardly in the same category as what I mean by setting goals.

Setting goals is fundamental to getting where you want to go. Goals point your energy in the right

direction. They allow you to know when you're getting closer and when you're getting farther away. They also let you know when you finally get there.

What most people mean by setting goals is writing down a list of things they want and packing it away until they forget about it. Then they look back at it a while later and get disappointed about not achieving that goal.

I don't consider that setting goals. I consider that wasting perfectly good ink.

Setting goals, ultimately, is a decision. A decision is made when you look at yourself in the mirror (or just metaphorically speaking) and decide that you're done. What you've settled for your whole life is no longer good enough. It is no longer a matter of "if" you're going to achieve your goal. It's a matter of when.

"When" is complicated. *"When"* depends on how well you pick your approach. It depends on genetics. It depends on lifestyle problems. It depends on thousands of factors beyond your control.

"If" is not complicated. You're no longer dealing with an *"if"* when you decide because you're never going to stop until you achieve that goal. You've decided and you'll keep changing your approach until you die or that decision is fulfilled.

So... while everyone goes and writes down their little goals in their journal and brags about things they're never going to be accomplishing, you get yourself committed to them. There are virtues to writing goals and planning specific aspects of them but you get nowhere until you've finally made a decision that you will never settle for anything less.

The funny thing is, once you finally do decide never to settle for anything less your goals will tend to show up faster than you're used to. That is, assuming you've set reasonable goals.

This section will help you set real goals that you can actually get yourself committed to. By precisely picking your goals you can ensure you set yourself up for crushing them and feeling great about it.

83. Specificity

“I want to increase my grades,” the student responded to my question about her goal.

“Oh... that’s easy,” I responded. She looked at me funny after that. Then I continued, “Just study every waking hour you’re not in class.” She laughed because she was familiar with how silly that sounded based on the things I said in my blog. Then I clarified with this point:

Non-specific goals are unbelievably brainless to create a plan for. When a person sets a goal to “increase their grade” they are not asking for anything but an increased grade. If they were to suddenly increase their grade by 1 point. They would have successfully achieved their goal.

Of course, no one that sets the goal of increasing their grade would want to only increase their grade by a single point. People are usually looking to increase their grades by specific amounts. People shouldn’t be setting a goal to increase their grade. They should be setting a goal to increase their grade to a specific amount.

Sometimes this problem goes in the other direction. Students set the goal to increase their grade when

they really want to increase their grade indefinitely. Turning C's into B's isn't good enough. Turning B's into A's isn't good enough. Finally, turning A's into A+'s still isn't good enough. They essentially want perfect grades on everything. This is a bit of a silly goal for a number of reasons but if you want to set this goal then at least be honest about it.

By leaving your goals inspecific, you never have a tangible target to be looking for. You end up getting some general direction but you never end up celebrating because you achieved it. More importantly, when you're setting a practically impossible goal like getting perfect grades on everything, you can end up driving yourself into the ground and never realize how impossible your goal really is.

Goals need specific results but they should usually include at least a few methodological factors as well. This has to do with the comment I had for the student I was talking with. The student just wanted to increase her grades. There are plenty of ways to do that. You can study all day or bribe the teacher or threaten the teacher or hack into the school computers or any of countless ways. That isn't what most student's real goal is.

Most students are looking to increase their grade by a specific amount while only spending a reasonable amount of time in the traditional classroom fashion.

Some students want to rule certain aspects out of their plan. If you're looking to increase your grade by a specific amount in a traditional classroom fashion without having to study then you actually have some criteria for your plan.

When your plan has some specific criteria to look for, it becomes a little more complicated to find a successful plan but it makes the plan significantly more likely to do what you really want done. It can be easy to lose sight of what you really want when you get caught up focusing on your plan. It's better to have yourself prepared for those challenges in advance.

84. Not Now Isn't Never

There is an ulterior motive to most students not setting specific goals.

When you set a specific goal, you're significantly more likely to fail at that goal. When you set a goal like increase your grades, you're setting a goal that cannot be failed. It can't be failed because it doesn't have a specific increase required. If you increase your goal by a single point, you succeeded. More importantly, it doesn't have a specific deadline. Without a date to say whether or not you failed, it's impossible to tell whether or not you did.

By setting non-specific goals, students are setting themselves up to never feel like they failed at achieving their goals. It will make them feel good but this won't help them increase their grades. It will just help them feel like they're doing something while getting absolutely nothing done. Getting better grades isn't about feeling better, it's about getting more done.

Setting specific goals will lead to more failure to achieve goals. There is no way around it. If you want to get better at something, you need to be willing to look at your own work critically. Without a specific deadline to look at your work critically, it may never happen.

One of the most important points to learn to handle this failure is this: **not now does not mean never.**

When you set a specific deadline for your goals you're not setting the date you're going to achieve that goal. Reality plays a role. You can't plan for all of the factors that will come into play. No matter how hard you try to set a good deadline, you won't always succeed.

Setting a deadline is about the motivation. It's not about the specific date. When you started a task, there is no chance you will ever know all of the factors involved. Sometimes you set a deadline and realize later that it was significantly easier than you thought. You'll end up achieving your goal early. More often you'll find out later that you didn't completely understand how complex your goal actually was to achieve. That means you will have to adjust accordingly.

The deadline is more of a measurement date than a success date.

In time, you might get better at setting good deadlines. You can't get to that point until you've already set plenty of bad deadlines. It takes practice.

If failing to achieve your goal by the date you want it to be achieved, makes you give up then there is no chance you will ever achieve that goal. There needs

to be some room for adjustment. That deadline date should be used to adjust and improve your strategy. It should have very little to do with whether you give up or not.

You will probably not achieve all of your goals the exact date you want to achieve them. It's unreasonable to think you could. Don't feel bad when you fail to achieve a goal by a specific deadline. Use that date to reevaluate your strategy. If you use that date For that reason then you'll constantly be getting closer and closer to your goal. You may not hit this deadline. You may not hit the next. But you'll never stop getting closer.

Someday, if you're willing to wait long enough (and you set a reasonable goal) then you will achieve it. The next two sections will go into how you can make those deadlines more reasonable from the start and how to adjust your strategy when those deadlines aren't achieved.

85. Deadlining

Deadlines are a personal thing. Depending on your own situation, achieving different goals is going to take a different amount of time.

But like most people, I prefer specifics. Consider this section a general guideline for all strategies you use to increase your grades.

With most students I work with, it takes at least a month to increase your average current grade by a single letter. By current grade, I'm referring to the grade you're getting on a day to day basis.

At the beginning of the semester it's easy to increase your final grade. Later in the semester, it becomes more and more difficult to increase that final grade. Your current grade can be considered the average grade you get on any particular day. After about a month, you can expect your grade on any particular assignment to be one letter grade higher than it would have been a month earlier.

This, of course, depends on your own situation. If you've been struggling in a class for years or not paying much attention recently, you may not see such a quick improvement. A certain amount of catch up time may be required. If, on the other hand, you've been dominating in a class recently, you might just

see your grades go up faster.

You also have to consider how much more difficult it is to turn B's into A's compared to C's into B's. The higher you go up, the more work you can expect it to take.

So take this specific deadline guideline very lightly. It's just to get you started.

Do not set a deadline that's too much sooner than a month if you're looking to improve your grade by a single letter. It's completely impractical. More importantly, the later you are in a semester, the less you should expect to increase your final grade. To increase your grade doesn't only require you increase your average grade you get now by the amount you want increase your final grade to. It also requires you make up for all the low grades and got in the past. The earlier you are in the semester, the less of a problem this is.

With each deadline you set, you may want to create an action plan based on your success or failure at achieving that goal.

If you fail to achieve a certain goal, it's helpful to have a plan how to move forward despite that failure. You can make the decision while you're thinking more rationally instead of when you are disappointed about failing to achieve your goal. You may increase your

study time a little because you're not ready to decrease it as much as you did. Or you may find some other area in your strategy that needs a little bit of development.

If you achieve your goal, you almost always have another goal in mind afterwards. It can be helpful to have a general idea of what your next goal is going to be before you actually achieve your current goal. This, again, helps you keep from getting caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment. It prevents you from making too crazy a goal based on your success.

86. A Primer On Tweaking Your Strategy

There are two different categories of tweaking your study strategy.

The first is to tweak your strategy as you're following through with it. Tweaking your strategy when you are not at a deadline has its advantages. It allows you to constantly watch your results and take action based on what you see. This, ideally, can help you find what parts of your strategy are helping your grade and which parts are hurting it.

It doesn't always work so well in practice though.

It's difficult to watch your results and adjust your strategy based on them. Often your results aren't based on your most recent actions but they're based on what you were doing before you adjusted. Since you don't get your grades immediately after you complete the assignment, you need to account for the time lapse. If you notice your grades lowering and change your strategy accordingly then you're going to have to be willing to wait a certain amount of time to remeasure the results.

You need to wait until, first of all, you've gotten used to the strategy change. Any strategy change you choose will rely on a little bit of getting used to. If

you're not used to that strategy yet then you can't count on the results being as objective.

You also need to wait until the grades you are seeing are actually the result of the strategy change you made. If you're getting an assignment from before the time you changed your strategy and seeing the lower result, you can't count on that result being anything but confusing.

There are ways to make changing your strategy on the fly productive. You can track every change you make carefully. By tracking those changes and the date you made those changes you'll have a general idea of what your grades are coming from. It isn't perfect but it's certainly better than just trying to figure it out as you go along.

In most cases though, the easier and more effective strategy is to measure your strategy at those specific deadlines and tweak based on what you learned. If you hope to adjust your strategy more often then just make a less difficult goal and a sooner deadline.

By using too many specific deadlines and adjusting based on these deadlines, you may run into some of the same problems discussed earlier. Your goal needs to be a reasonable balance. Setting deadlines too far from each other will end up with you not being able to improve your grades fast because the tweaking will take too long. By setting deadlines too close you can't

track how you're tweaking is actually affecting particular grades.

If you're getting closer to your goal then you can tweak and continue. If, on the other hand, you see you're getting farther from the goal you want to achieve, you need to do a more significant change. If your grades are actually lowering when your goal is to increase them, dramatic changes are reasonable. In fact, those changes should probably be back towards the direction you came from.

If you lost points when you were trying to increase your grade by studying less then you'd probably want to increase your studying a little closer to where you started, at least temporarily. You may not be ready to go as far as you did. There are plenty of factors that could be playing a role in this. Perhaps you need to change your experiment in some other way.

Tweaking a study strategy won't always move your grade up but by consistently removing your mistakes and focusing on your successes you can ensure over the long haul your grade will go up as much as you're willing to continue adjusting it.

Lifestyle

Freshman year in college is tough for most students.

Most students would agree with that. They would agree with that for different reasons though.

Some students think freshman year is tough because of their classes. Other students think the personal aspects of college are a lot tougher. Other students worry about the classic freshman 15 pounds they end up putting on. I think these factors are all more closely related than you might think at first. They're all related to a single change that most students go through in freshman year.

In freshman year, a student's life gets flipped upside down. Absolutely every aspect of that student's life changes. Students move away from home.

Students suddenly have significantly more responsibilities to worry about. They end up having to worry about when they go to bed. They no longer have their parents watching over their shoulder to make sure they go to bed at a reasonable time. They no longer have their parents to make sure they get dinner. They no longer have their parents to keep an eye on their grades. It all comes down to the student.

These changes are the cause of a significant amount of the strife the average college freshman goes through. All these changes in the student's life inevitably cause something they care about to be neglected. Students that care about their grades might suddenly care about their grades a little less because they're distracted by everything else.

Freshman year is the perfect example of how important lifestyle is to a student's success or failure. A student that does not have their life managed well enough cannot manage their grades well consistently. The more successfully a student can manage their own life, the more likely they are to be able to manage their own grades.

To a certain extent life can help your grades. By doing the right things in life you'll be in a better position to learn what you need to learn. I consider this a relatively minor factor though. There is only so much this is really improving your grades. I consider something else the real important reason to worry about your lifestyle.

If not managed properly, your lifestyle can absolutely decimate your ability to do well in school. You may, in practice, be improving your grade by worrying about your lifestyle but in reality you're just not doing bad in school because of your lifestyle. Not staying up late and not partying too much don't improve your grade but they do help preserve the grade you should be

getting. Managing your life is about making sure your personal life doesn't become too much of a distraction for your grades.

A certain percentage of improving your grades comes from this. You can't neglect it without suffering some consequences. It's better to know this in advance and be prepared for it. Improving your grades can't only be focused on factors directly related to your grade. If you see your grades struggling, it may be that your strategy is bunk or it may be that you're changing your lifestyle in too negative a way to improve it with your strategy.

If there is one thing that studying does for most students, it's increasing the chances that the student will be more responsible about other factors like sleep and drugs. They'll account for these kinds of things more and that ends up helping their grades at least as much as the studying in many cases. Most students that stop studying don't just stop studying, they also end up doing other things with their time that interrupt their sleep and every other aspect of their life.

No that doesn't mean studying is required. It's just part of the reason it tends to work.

87. A Sure Fire Method For Failure

Sometimes, it's just unreasonable to expect certain things out of yourself.

Many students get the impression that they're some kind of superhuman species. They think that the basic understanding people have developed over that last few thousand years about the human species somehow don't apply to them.

"I don't need that much sleep"

This is one of the most common comments I hear. Students end up getting almost no sleep and then talk about how they don't need much sleep. To some extent, that is true. You probably don't need that much sleep. You don't need that much sleep in the way you don't need to not fall down a set of stairs. Falling down a set of stairs might be very painful for you but you'll probably... probably live.

Not getting much sleep will hurt your grades. There is just no reasonable way to say otherwise. There is some natural variation from person to person but there isn't a scientific study that suggests that natural variation goes down to only a few hours. If you're getting less than 7 hours of sleep a night then you're probably not working at your peak efficiency.

If you're getting less than 5 hours of sleep a night consistently then you're counting on your grades suffering. There is no reasonable reason to think otherwise based on the studies. People that sleep less have worse memories, reaction times, and moods. Then there are the countless other factors that may be involved.

Neglecting any major aspect of your life like this is a sure-fire way to not achieve any worthwhile goal.

Another area that students tend to struggle with is their diet. This problem tends to come from a number of different angles.

Some people eat so little food that they're not going to be able to think as effectively when they need it. This is a particularly big deal if that hunger becomes a consistent distraction. Other people eat so much extra food that they're inevitably going to become lethargic trying to process it all.

Even worse than those two problems, some people end up cycling this process to large degrees. One day they eat themselves sick and the next they're starving themselves sick. Good luck managing any consistent routine that involves your brain with that strategy.

Many studies have also suggested that moving around can help a person's brain activity. The more

time a person spends sitting, the less effectively they're going to be able to think. By exercising, or just moving around a lot, a person's brain can become more active.

There are tons of other areas that students have to worry about. Virtually any part of your life being neglected can make your grades suffer.

If you don't do laundry enough then you might be so distracted by your own smell in class that you can't focus. Stupid little factors like that can play a major role in your grade because they add up over time. Failing to focus through one class won't kill you but after 4 or 5 you're bound to have problems keeping up without making up for it studying.

Neglecting your life is a sure-fire way to force yourself into neglecting your grades.

88. Simple Schedules

Schedules get a bad name from a certain brand of schedulers.

Some people create absolutely ridiculous schedules. They create their schedules in a way that is impossible for anyone sane to follow consistently. Some people schedule their lives down to 15 minute intervals.

Scheduling in this way is a recipe for disaster. The first and most obvious reason that's the case is that it's impossible to follow through with.

If you can't follow through with a certain study routine then you certainly can't consider it a good one. One of the most important factors to consider while you're creating a schedule is to ensure that it is practically possible for you to follow through with it. You also need to be willing to do it. It's pointless to create a plan for something if you're not able to follow through it.

The schedule that you can't follow through with is kind of like not having a schedule at all. It's completely pointless. Not only that. It's a complete waste of time.

If you're not following through with your schedule then

the time took to plan that schedule was wasted. If you scheduled yourself down to 15 minute increments then I'm guessing you spent a ridiculous amount of time on that wasted schedule.

These increments also encourage you to create smaller and smaller time periods to do different things. If you have 15 minute increments in your potential schedule then you're more likely to schedule things for those 15 minute increments. If you only go down to hour long increments then you're much more likely to use those hour long time periods.

By that, I mean, if you only use hour long increments to track your schedule then you're more likely to give yourself a reasonable hour to eat lunch. If you're using 15 minute increments then you're much more likely to create a ridiculous goal like eating in 15 minutes. This is the kind of stuff that risks harming other areas of your life more than it helps your grades.

I would never suggest that careful a schedule. Schedules have their advantages though.

When you have a good schedule and a modicum of discipline, you can be confident something will get done. When you don't have a schedule, it's much harder to make that happen.

When you're doing something, it's pretty hard to stop

to start doing what you're supposed to do. If you know you have to complete a particular homework assignment then something is going to have to motivate you to get up and actually do it. For most students, it becomes a big to do. They waste hours and hours trying to make that happen. they waste more time avoiding the assignment than just doing it.

Schedules make completing things easy. Instead of requiring you to convince yourself it's the right time to do something, you already know it is. When you have a schedule that you actually intend to follow, if it comes to the time you're supposed to study then you don't have to think about whether or not you're prepared. You already know you are. There is no choice at that point and in the long run that saves you a lot of stress.

If you follow that schedule consistently, that schedule will eventually become a habit. Once it becomes a habit you won't even have to think about following through with it. You'll just start doing it automatically. You not only save the time you spend worrying about when you're going to study but you do it without needing the discipline to force yourself to do it at any particular moment. This is a habit you want to be in.

The more habitual you are about the things you want consistently managed in your life, the better off you'll be. It will end up saving you a lot of stress worrying about things that you normally do have to worry

about. You'll be able to manage problems that come up by changing your habit. But, often, habitual strategies are already productive.

For example, if you normally eat right before class then you're never going to get hungry in class to the point of being distracted. If you're in the habit of not eating before class and you always get hungry right before class then you know what's responsible for that. the consistency makes it easy to manage. If some days you eat and some days you don't and some days you're hungry and some days you're not it becomes impossible to figure out what's going on.

Schedules help but excessive schedules hurt.

89. Live The Material

This is a strategy that you're not always going to be able to apply in your classes. Despite that, when you can apply it, it's going to make such a big difference that it's well worth learning.

This strategy is particularly difficult for most high school students to apply. College students will have a slightly easier time applying it. In fact, the more specialized you get into a particular subject the more likely it is going to play a role. It's the reason experts in any particular subject can become as large of experts as they are.

People don't become great experts in any particular subject by going to class and doing their homework. It's just not enough. To become a truly great expert at any particular thing, a person has to dedicate a large portion of their life to it. They have to spend their free time working on it. Some experts read about their subject while they're eating. Some experts stay up late, not to party, but actually look into something they really care about. These are the kind of decisions that make someone an expert.

You don't have to want to be an expert to appreciate this strategy though. In fact, you don't even have to go as far as experts. All you need to do is change your

perspective on a subject.

By looking at the subject like it's just a class you need to pass, you're not going to be able to develop as deep an understanding of that subject. By looking at a subject like it's an important part of your life, you're going to be able to become an expert. You'll learn faster. And you'll spend more time thinking about the subject.

One of the best ways to make this happen is to find some aspect of the class that can help you have a good time. If you are in math class and you find any particular assignment kind of entertaining then take some time and actually do those kinds of problems for fun. If you think writing for English class is fun then spend some time writing something. These kind of decisions will improve your grade dramatically more than most other factors.

Take advantage of this when you can.

Don't try to fool yourself though. If you don't really enjoy something then you're not going to see as much benefit from spending more time with it. You need to have a reason to want to spend time with it. The more reasons you have, the better you going to be able to learn it. The fewer reasons you have, the more it becomes a traditional (aka bad) study routine.

As you get later in college you'll find that the subjects

you go over are closer and closer to your potential career (at least in technical majors.) Remember that as you're moving forward through your classes. This isn't something that you have to study to pass a class. This is something that you have to study to improve your future in general.

The more understanding becomes about your grade, the harder it's going to be. There's no way around it completely but when you have the chance to get around it you need to take it.

90. Discuss It

This is a more practical alternative to the previous point.

Making a subject a significant part of your life is a challenge. You only have so much time and energy to spend on different subjects or concepts. It's impossible to use it for everything that you're trying to learn. There is a slightly easier alternative that can be surprisingly effective.

When you talk about a subject that you're studying, you're helping yourself remember the material. As mentioned a few times earlier in this book, repetition is one of the most common strategies people use to remember stuff. It may not be the best way but it makes a difference.

More importantly though, when you talk about a subject, you're helping yourself understand the material better. The simple act of trying to explain the ideas to someone else can lead you to exploring new ideas that you would have never discovered just thinking about it. You're forced to think from another person's perspective as you're explaining that and it can lead to better ways for you to explain it to yourself.

On top of that, when you discuss it with other people, you're getting their help in discovering new questions. When you explain something to someone, there is a good chance they won't understand your explanation. When they don't understand it, they can ask questions that provoke you to think about the subject in a more complete way. You're no longer just concerned with the normal things you worry about. You're introduced to the ways that other people concern themselves about the subject.

To make this effective, you need to try to discuss the subject more casually than you're used to. Try to talk about the subject as if the person you're talking to knows nothing about the subject. That means you're forced to avoid hiding your own ignorance behind big and impressive words. When you don't understand something, it becomes obvious because you're forced to explain it using words you don't normally use in conversation.

Sometimes you can discuss class material directly with people from class. This can be helpful but at a certain point, this strategy just turns into a traditional study routine. If you're just talking in the same terms you'd use talking to the teacher then you might as well just be studying in a more traditional approach.

It's better to find excuses to talk about the subject with people that don't already know what you're talking about. This makes it impossible for you to treat it like

a study session. You're forced to find a way to make the material interesting (and yes, interesting is possible in every subject if you're doing it right.)

If you try to bore people's ears off talking about the subject then they'll probably leave. Instead you have to think about how you can make the listener curious about what you're talking about.

If you can make someone else curious about a subject then, odds are, you'll also make yourself a little more curious too.

Find excuses to discuss what you're trying to learn and you'll learn it much faster.

91. Energy Management

A lot of people complain about not having enough time.

Time management is an industry that sells enough books to keep you reading for your entire life. People write book after book explaining the details, even the most miniscule, of managing their time. Everyone seems to have some kind of a method to do it. The reality is that most people aren't even at their limit of time.

Sure... they say they have no time but when they get home at night they have plenty of time to watch a few pointless television shows. They probably check their facebook five or six times in the process. Maybe, if they muster up the motivation they'll read a few more pages about how they can more efficiently manage their time. (I wonder how many time management books don't get read because their owners don't muster up the energy to read them.)

Most people have enough time at the end of the day. What they're lacking is energy. After spending a full day at school pushing yourself, you're probably going to be tired. The harder you push yourself during that time (or the more you have to push yourself just to stay there,) the less energy you're going to have at

the end of the day.

People are not endless fountains of energy. There is no exception to “no energy is created or destroyed” for people with enough motivation. No matter how motivated you are, you’re limited by the energy your body can create.

Sure... I think absolutely anyone can perform seemingly miraculous feats. There are people that can squeeze every ounce of energy out of themselves in order to run an ultramarathon. When they get home and fall into a puddle on their couch, they’re going to feel like they dug up more energy than they ever knew they had. Despite that, the reality is that they had this energy stored. The human body is very skilled at tearing apart other parts of yourself to handle short term stressors.

This ultramarathoner may have performed an extraordinary feat but they likely tore apart other parts of themselves in the process. Perhaps they burned fat stored on their body. Perhaps they burned muscle. Perhaps they did some miraculous carbo load for some of that energy. The reality is that they had the energy.

Many students try and do what an ultramarathon runner does but worse. They constantly tear away at their own health and energy. They can do it because the human body is awesome but it is costing them

more than they realize.

You are able to work hard on school and sports and friends and every other thing you may feel like you're pushing yourself in but at a certain point, you're not even going to realize how much damage you're dealing to yourself. (Just ask a marathon runner how they feel near the end. It's usually not miserable. It's usually just "in the zone" or a little out of it.) You're not doing anything impossible. You're losing energy somewhere.

Never lose sight of how valuable your energy actually is. It is a limited resource. Often you don't even notice when you're all out because you're stuck in the zone. That doesn't mean you have unlimited energy. It just means you're taking it from somewhere else that you're not paying any attention to.

92. Real Relaxation

Relaxation is important.

Considering you have limited energy, you need to take time to recover energy. The most obvious time to do this recovery is at night. If you're not sleeping at night than that's the place to start. If you have your sleep routine down then you need to start thinking about how you take time for yourself.

This is one area where the most motivated people falter. They go out there with good intentions of taking some time for themselves but in no time at all their turning it into one of the major parts of their life they're looking to manage.

Maybe they'll set up a workout routine. Workouts can be great for melting the stress out of your life. Study after study has shown this. Of course, motivated people often take this farther. They don't just work out to relax a little. Then end up creating a massively difficult to follow workout routine. Maybe they'll work out an hour a day. They'll continue to say they do it for themselves while more often they're doing it to turn time for themselves into more time for them to be productive.

I remember a college student that started to do yoga

for relaxation. Within a year of starting she was stressed out because she couldn't get her poses quite as perfect as she was hoping. Despite that, she continued to insist she was doing it for relaxation.

Relaxation is not actively trying to improve yourself. It's taking time where improving yourself isn't the final goal. Progress may take place but if it doesn't happen, you can't be punishing yourself for it. If you punish yourself for failing to relax successfully then you've got bigger problems than your lack of relaxation.

There is a line between relaxation and improving yourself. Improving yourself can be relaxing but actively trying to improve yourself is not. It's another chore that you're "supposed" to do.

Of course, some people use this "relaxation" in the other direction. They might listen to a podcast about a subject they're studying and feel productive despite not having made any effort to improve themselves. They just listened. Just listening without the intent to improve is relaxation. Don't go on trying to prove to yourself your unproductive tasks are productive or you're never going to be able to see the results of real productivity.

It's best to keep relaxation and work explicitly separated. By keeping both categories separate from one another, you never have to worry about finding

any particular balance because your productive activities are not supposed to be relaxing and your relaxing activities aren't supposed to be productive.

By taking the time to relax completely and consciously, you recover from harder work faster. You may not find the right balance immediately but it can become a factor that you play with until you get it right.

You'll find yourself gaining energy for the things that you really value and, ideally, learning to worry less about the little tasks that just keep you busy and not too productive. Instead of just feeling like you're productive, you end up actually being productive. This turns cycling your energy into a practical and reasonable way of managing your energy.

93. Give Yourself Excuses (Sometimes)

There are a lot of impressive sounding hard work quotes. I particularly like the one that says “I expected more out of myself than anyone else could have expected.”

It's phrases like this that get a certain breed of person pushing past the pain. I happen to be one of them. By reading a quote like that I could convince myself to do just about anything (for a little while.)

Eventually though, like most people, I'd end up getting myself sick or depressed. When I got over that sickness or depression I just kept on pushing until I got sick or depressed again.

This isn't going to sound very good to all the people like me out there but it's true.

You're human. You can't turn yourself into a productivity machine. You shouldn't even try to. You should embrace your human aspects because that's all you're ever going to be. This is one of those natural human tendencies that you should learn to embrace at times.

People are good at coming up with stories to explain failures.

Some people embrace this. They're able to come up with convincing excuses why their failure was inevitable. Maybe they failed because their teacher didn't like them. Maybe they failed because the system was rigged for them to fail. Maybe they failed because their friends were bothering them. These are the kinds of people that I tend to struggle to understand but they always seem to take life a little lighter for their excuses.

I might say I failed because I failed to foresee the actions of another person. That's a pretty depressing statement. I'm saying I failed. Not only that but I'm setting the expectation that success is the ability to see how other people are going to act in the future. That's not exactly a way to improve your odds of being in a good mood.

Another person in the same situation might say that they got screwed over by another person. That isn't the kind of thought that would drive someone into depression. It's kind of like saying, "bad stuff happens." It's not a happy thought but it's much less bad than blaming yourself.

More often than not, excuses are unproductive wastes of time. They will rarely ever help you achieve the goals you set for yourself.

Despite that, there are times to appreciate excuses.

When you're trying to relax, you need to be willing to come up with a few excuses for yourself. If you didn't do as well as you wanted to on a test then when you're trying to sit down and relax after, you should be willing to say that the teacher threw a bunch of curveballs at you. If that doesn't relax you then talk about how grades don't mean anything anyway. If that doesn't work then tell yourself that you may have thought you wanted to pass but subconsciously you wanted to fail because it would make you a stronger person.

Yes... go as stupid and unrealistic as you have to in order to relax.

Then, the next day when you're back to studying, feel nothing but the toughest of reality pushing you forwards.

This may sound a little hokey but it all comes down to the natural idea of domain dependence.

94. Domain Dependence

Domain dependence is the natural tendency to use different strategies for solving similar problems in a different environment.

One of the most common stories to start a discussion on domain dependence is that statisticians are dramatically more likely to make a statistical mistake when they're asked about it outside of a statistical context. If you were to ask a statistician a statistical question in the classroom they would give you a logical way to solve the problem. If you were to ask them at the family barbeque then they're much more likely to offer an incorrect method of solving the problem.

Humans are not good at using logical solutions in practice.

You might think about the self-help industry for examples of this. Great psychology experts write thousands and thousands of books about how to be happy. Readers devour this kind of material. Often, the people that read these books actually learn the lessons from the books. Despite that, self-help has a very low success rate because most people just don't do what they know how to do.

Knowing how to do something is different from finding a practical application for it in your day to day life. (As a slight tangent, this is interesting proof that the students that say "I'll never use this in real life," are usually right. Even if they have the chance to use it, odds are, they won't.) Every time that you could practically apply the solution you're too distracted using one of your natural problem solving

mechanisms.

This is the kind of tendency that people might try to overcome but that tendency is just more proof that you're missing the point. It's impractical to think you can overcome your natural methods of solving problems. You may be able to catch yourself in a moment and think rationally but that is matter of mind over matter, it won't become habitual. Just like a statistician will make statistical mistakes out of the classroom, you will make silly illogical mistakes.

Instead of trying to overcome this tendency, it might do you some good to embrace it.

You're going to be emotional and illogical at times. Why not find ways to use those emotional tendencies to your advantage?

In the previous section I discussed how you should be willing to make excuses for yourself when you're trying to relax but take full responsibility when you're about to do work on something. This isn't a natural habitual process you can learn. If you're the kind of person that struggles to relax, your natural tendency is probably going to be towards pushing yourself harder. Your goal is to make yourself think about the other extreme end. All humans have all tendencies. Some are just more habitual than others. If you give yourself the excuse to get lazy then you're much more likely to be able to relax when you really need it.

Here is where domain dependence comes in. It's completely natural to do this. At a certain point, when you want to get something done, just push yourself with the opposite of excuses. When you start taking responsibility for things, you force yourself to make things happen.

This is just embracing your emotional tendencies. It's creating domain dependent strategies for explaining the same situation.

Being completely logical is impossible. It's much easier just to accept your illogical nature and do your best to use those weaknesses in a more productive way.

(The reality is that both domains are wrong. Obviously you're not completely responsible for anything. You can actively do horrible things and plenty of studies can explain that away by the way you were raised. Of course, not everything can be taken completely out of your control without completely eliminating your need for any attempts at improvement at all. If everything is beyond your control then it's pointless to read this book.)

95. Learn From Emotions

This is an idea that was mentioned in the earlier section about facing your fear.

A certain amount of your education comes down to managing your own emotions in a reasonable way. A lot of specific methods have already been discussed to help manage those emotions. Those methods can't help you resolve every personal situation though. For that, you need to understand a deeper concept.

Focusing while you're stuck in an emotional spiral is virtually impossible. There needs to be some stability in a person's emotions for them to focus on what they need to. All their energy gets sapped away from where it's needed and instead ends up wasted in a spiral of a certain emotion. The more a person tries to fight it, the worse it can get.

Emotions aren't bad.

I know we all happen to enjoy happiness and excitement and all those positive emotions but the negative emotions exist for a reason too (and not only just to punish you.) All of your emotions are delivering a signal to your nervous system. Most of this emotional information is never even considered rationally. It's just acted upon blindly.

For the most part, this is a good thing. Humans from thousands of years ago relied on these unconscious guesses. Certain situations make people feel scared without any specific logical reason they can distinguish. This kind of fear helps you prepare for potential dangers. Thousands of years ago, a rustle in the bushes could have been a predator coming to eat you. It makes sense that your body will immediately freak out before you even think about it.

All emotions have similar potential messages to deliver.

When you're feeling sad you're getting a message that something needs to change. Usually it's one of two things that need to change. Either you need to change what you do or you need to change the way you think.

Sometimes you might be sad because you didn't do as well as you thought you should have on a test. This can be a signal that you need to change your approach to preparing for tests. That signal is your body making sure that you take that grade seriously.

Of course, at a certain point, it's completely unreasonable to expect more out of yourself. Feeling like you should have got a higher score on a test and being sad about it could be a sign you need to reevaluate what's important to you. Are you really

willing to put in the extra effort to get that higher score and would it be worth it if you were?

On top of that, people do have bad days. Do you need to be more reasonable about your own personal expectations.

Being tough on yourself is good. Making it impossible for you to ever be satisfied isn't so good.

Learn to take these emotions as signals to change something and you'll constantly be managing your emotions in a consistent way. That will give you the chance you focus harder on the material when you need to without quite as much roller coaster emotions.

96. Never Cram

Cramming is one of the least productive and most common strategies that the average student uses.

Sure... if you invest 10 consecutive hours into studying a subject, a certain amount of that information is going to stick with you. That being said, it's going to be dramatically less information than you could have remembered if you spread that 10 hours over 10 days (or 20 days.)

Cramming is wildly inefficient. This is one of the most scientifically well understood study concepts around. The longer someone sits and tries to study, the less efficient they become at studying. Most people peak with their study efficiency around 15 minutes. After that, it's all downhill when it comes to efficiency.

The most common excuse I hear for cramming comes down to this: People think that they need to cram. They study less than they think they should for weeks or months until it's too late for them to correct themselves. They now NEED to cram.

The sad truth is that a student in that position already failed to study efficiently. There is no way for them to go back in time and get the highest potential grade they could have earned. There grades might as well

have lost some points already. They probably will have a slightly higher grade by cramming but it's kind of like they're trading in a great grade in exchange for an acceptable one.

Just because cramming CAN get you a better grade, it doesn't mean you should do it.

Whenever you cram you're giving yourself permission to "need to" cram again in the future. You're saving your own butt from getting the dramatically reduced grade that you actually deserve. You're throwing all your good focus habits out the window and instead just trying to shovel information into your skull.

You make it that much easier to cram again the next time around. You're decreasing the odds you'll study properly next time. Maybe... you should just suck it up and get a lower grade once. Then you might actually realize you need to study more efficiently.

You should never be cramming. If you are completely eliminating your studying then cramming the night before the test can be tempting. You may be worried and try to alleviate it by cramming. If you prepared for the test properly in every other way then a cram is completely unnecessary. If you didn't prepare properly then you have bigger problems to worry about than your next test score. A cram will hinder your progress more than it will help.

If you're going to study then study efficiently. Study over days or weeks for shorter periods of time. If you really feel desperate to cram then spend a few minutes studying a completely unrelated subject. Or... just distract yourself from school completely by doing something fun.

If your grade ends up low a few times from this strategy then you actually have some emotional stake forcing you to learn to study (or not study) properly. Cramming reduces the pain but it also prolongs the crappy habits.

Never cram.

97. Don't Need A Miracle

It's the end of the semester and students all around are freaking out.

They're all worried about how well they do on their finals and last assignments. They're desperate to get a certain grade because, if they don't, they're going to fail (or at least embarrass themselves.) Their final assignment scores are absolutely essential because they will lift or lower the student's grade enough to make a big difference.

Some students have gone as far as needing a high score on their finals just to pass their class. Imagine the challenge of getting through that. If you struggled to get passing grades consistently then you're probably going to struggle to get a passing grade on the final. Suddenly needing a huge grade boost from it just to pass is virtually hopeless.

All these freaking out students have failed in one of the most fundamental strategies to simplifying your education. Don't need a miracle to hit your goal.

All students should be focusing on this goal. This is particularly true for the students that aren't too picky about their grades. You may not always need an A+ to be happy but you should consider a certain grade

absolutely essential. As soon as your grade falls below that set point, it's time to reinvest your energy in the class.

This set point grade average should differ from class to class. It essentially comes down to the grade where you can fail the final miserably and still get the minimum grade you'd be happy with. If your final was worth 10% of your final grade and you really wanted a C for your final grade then you should have at least a B going into the final. It's impossible to fail.

Finals are stressful. There is no way around it. You should be going into these tests with minimal expectations out of yourself. Naturally, the higher your set point grade is, the harder this goal becomes. That means you may need to relax the complete failure security and settle for a slightly less deep net. If you're going for an A on that final test and 10% of your final grade is that finals score then you might set the goal to 5% (of the total points, not pretest points) below your target score. That means you'll only need a 50% to hit your target. Everything above that is bonus.

It's easier to bring your grade up earlier in the semester than later. You're going to have plenty of problems other than managing your last few points around this time. The best thing you can do is set yourself up so even a minimal effort will get you where you want to be.

More important than that though. Never set yourself up to need an awesome grade on your final assignments to hit your target. If you couldn't score high enough to boost your grade on earlier (likely easier) assignments then don't expect you'll be able to do it when the pressure is on.

98. People That Value Grades

Some people value the grades they get. Other people don't.

It's possible to surround yourself with people that don't care about their grades and still score well in school. I did that for years myself. Most of the time though, it's just not worth the extra trouble for anyone you could manage living without.

If your friends are just friends of convenience (Hey! We go to the same school. I guess I'll hang out with them,) then you might as well pick your friends on the basis of who will help you improve your grades and who won't.

When you're surrounding yourself by people that don't care about their grades, you're going to be encouraged to do the same. No... probably not by that weird peer pressure that everyone talks about but by the habits that you'll tend to pick up from them.

Whether you like it or not, you pick up the qualities of the people you surround yourself with. If you're surrounding yourself by people that don't get much sleep then you're not going to get as much sleep. If you surround yourself with people that talk to each other through class instead of actually focusing then

you'll pick up a similar habit. If you spend time with people that don't do their assignments for class then you'll end up doing fewer of your own assignments. There is nothing wrong with making these changes but if you value your grades then you need to consider this a liability.

If, on the other hand, you surround yourself with people that care about their grades, you'll end up encouraging yourself to do more than you would have without them. You'll pick up the habits of actually shutting up while the teacher is talking because, quite frankly, that's a prerequisite for focusing on what they're saying. You'll moderate your sleeping patterns a little better. You will end up doing more of your assignments better.

You don't need to be a traditionally good student. You don't need perfect habits by any means. In fact, after I started to spend more time with more school focused students I found that I could relax more than usual. Instead of always being the student trying to balance hanging out with friends and completing class work I got to relax with friends and complete class work at the same time.

It just simplifies everything. Instead of battling with the idea of having fun or working on what you're supposed to do to get the grade you want you just get to pick one of them. When the people you hang out with share your values, life tends to get easier.

Of course. This isn't the way you should decide on your friends. Friends are much more valuable than your grades but if the only difference between your friends is the value they give to their grades, lean towards the one that values their grades. If you're going to be surrounding yourself by people, don't you want them to be the people that care about what you care about.

Many school relationships come down to cliques and convenience. Don't let those factors define your friendships and don't feel forced to spend your time with people that don't value what you value. (And don't worry. Cool tends to evolve as you get older anyway. College seniors that don't care about their grades get a lot less respect than high school seniors.)

99. Embrace Your Passions

You get better at every aspect of your grades when you embrace the things you really care about.

If you're particularly skilled in a subject, it may seem like a bit of a waste to focus a good amount of your energy on improving it.

For example, if you're an A student in english class then, efficiency suggests you might be better off investing your energy improving your B in math class than investing more of your time into english. You only have a little room to gain in english and a whole lot of room to gain in math. That makes gaining in math much easier. There are more cheap points available.

To some extent, that thinking should play a role in your decision making process. If you have no strong preferences for math or english then you might want to follow the most efficient strategy and study math. That being said, most people do have preferences getting in the way.

If that skilled english student actually loves the subject immensely then another factor comes into play. When you really care about a subject, you learn more than just about the subject when you study it. That time you invest studying the subject you love changes the

way you think about certain assignments. It increases your general enjoyment of school. That extra time on the subject you care about may improve your grades in other classes for that reason.

Even if it didn't improve your grades, it's worth considering focusing your energy on what you care about anyway.

When you study what you care about, despite it not being the most efficient use of your time, you're encouraging habits that can help you more than just with your grades. Life values experts. In school, jacks of all trades are appreciated. In life, experts get that appreciation.

If you're really competing for a competitive college then forget about this guidance. Your best bet in that department is just fighting for as high an average grade as possible. If you're already in the college you want (or aren't too picky) then don't waste too much of your time in areas you don't love.

Sometimes, it's just unpleasant to focus on the areas you're struggling. Sure. You may pull a point or two extra from it on average but it's stressful.

There are things that dramatically increase your grades for only a little bit of stress. This is the opposite of that. If you study the things you hate then you may gain a few points but it's going to add a

whole lot of extra stress to your life.

It's ultimately up to you whether or not it's worth it but I'd suggest picking your battles carefully.

That doesn't mean neglect every subject you hate. If you hate a subject then you probably just need a little bit of a perspective change on the subject. I'm only suggesting that sometimes it's acceptable to pick slight inefficiencies over high stress strategies.

Compliance is important. If you can't follow through with any of the suggestions in this book then you shouldn't force yourself through them. The most important aspect of all is setting up a strategy that you can actually do consistently.

Your grades aren't determined by any particular moment. They're determined by your consistent behavior.

100. Prepare To Relearn It

You're not going to magically remember everything that you learned in class.

No amount of studying or focus during class time will make you remember a large portion of what you study 5 years or more later when you're not already using that information daily. It's just impractical without some kind of a system designed to permanently review this information. While I recommend a system to review information over summer break, I'm not so much of a fan of studying the same stuff you've learned indefinitely.

Reviewing work over summer break is only useful because it has a specific purpose. You know the information you're reviewing will be important because you're going to be going back to class in only a few months. Studying for years after that could be pointless (or seemingly pointless.)

No matter how hard you try, at some point in your life, you're going to need to relearn some of the stuff you learned in class. You may still have your personal resources to review but those resources may look unfamiliar to you. This is okay.

This is not a problem with the method you used to

study it in the first place. This is a problem with the nature of the situation. Any way you learn information (beyond constant exposure) will end up suffering from this consequence.

The good news is: it's not much of a problem. Learning something the second time is dramatically easier than learning it the first time. A certain amount of what you're relearning will come directly from memories that pop up when you start re-exposing yourself to the stimuli. If you dig completely back into that subject, you'll often understand more than when you learned it the first time around.

The third time of learning something is easier than the second.

You may not be able to remember anything forever but you don't have to spend your time suffering about that now. All you need to do is remember it through your class. To force yourself to remember it like it was second nature for years requires such a huge time investment that you could relearn it all 3 or 4 more times through your life.

Sure... if you're going to be a doctor, maybe it's a good idea to make anatomy second nature. If you're going to be a doctor then it may not a good top priority to make physics second nature. Only focus dramatic amounts of energy on a subject if you know it's going to constantly be useful to you because relearning stuff

years later isn't all that bad.

You only have so much time in your life. You can't invest it all making everything you're learning second nature. By can't, if you're taking any notable course load then I mean "can't." To make something second nature for years requires a constant exposure to the stimuli. You can't just study the new stuff. You're forced to study the old stuff and the new stuff. You're forced to study well passed the point the information is boring to you. It's completely impractical to do that for all your classes.

Relearning is okay. Don't expect information to last forever. In fact, if it does, you could be studying dramatically less efficiently than you have to be.

101. Have A Purpose

You can do just about anything anyone else can do and more if you have a big enough reason.

Wanting to get good grades isn't enough. If you just want to get good grades then you're never going to have the focus and motivation to do what you need to do and to take the risks that you need to take. The reality is that no one is just looking to get good grades. All motivations go deeper.

No one cares the difference between an F and an A on a sheet of paper. The letters alone mean nothing. They're just letters. Sometimes people want certain letters because of the knowledge it represents. These are the kinds of people that enjoy winning trivia contests without a prize. It's the challenge that pulls them in.

Other people want those letters because of what their teachers or parents will think when they see those letters. People tend to be disappointed when they see a student getting lower grades. They tend to be happier when the student is getting higher grades. That thought alone can drive many students to putting a ton of effort into class.

Other people want those letters because of what

opportunities people will give them based on those letters. Colleges don't give too many scholarships to D students. Many colleges don't want to accept students that get low grades. If you're getting top notch grades then you might just end up with colleges competing to get you to attend. That can feel really good.

Other people look at the practical applications of the knowledge these letters represent. The letters show you learned what you needed to. They're just a measurement device more than a prize in themselves. That knowledge can then be used in the student's personal life or career. It will have practical uses for the student. Some students are going as far as trying to save the world with their knowledge.

Ultimately, getting good grades, in some way or another is about making yourself feel good.

There are certain kinds of feeling good that people are willing to fight for. There are other kinds of feeling good that people enjoy but don't seek out. Whenever you're sitting down to study, you should understand your base purpose and how that changes the way you proceed.

If the thought of preparing for your future drives you then you need to realize this every time you feel yourself softening up your routines. If the thought of making your family happy drives you then this needs

to be your thought. If you just like to learn for the sake of learning then start focusing more on this fact. There is one more idea worth focusing on:

If nothing drives you more than helping people, you need to find a way to make what you're learning about helping people. That will make every second of class dramatically more productive. It will make every assignment you do feel important.

This is one of the most powerful motivations you can have.

People are usually willing to settle for less when they're just trying to please themselves. If they're trying to please others they may be willing to push even harder. If you're trying to do good for someone else then you'll have a constant stream of positive emotions driving you to succeed.

Learn your purpose (for now, it will change) and the details tend to fall into place.

Conclusion

Using the strategies outlined in this book thousands of students have dramatically improved their grades without the traditional “work more” study advice. The safe path is the traditional path. If you’re looking to play it safe then maybe this strategy isn’t for you.

The reality is that playing it safe isn’t as good as it’s cracked up to be.

First of all, teachers will never give you extraordinary grades if you don’t stand out in some way. You could stand out by being particularly hard working or smart but ultimately you’re fighting a losing battle. There is always someone smarter than you. There is always someone willing to work harder than you too. That is, assuming you’re rational about how important school is. Someone will always be willing to invest everything in their class despite not getting much from it. It’s impossible to compete for the average person.

A better approach is to learn to play it smart. Playing it smart is not always safe. Sometimes you think you can get a 100 on a test without studying. Playing it safe would be studying for that test anyway. That isn’t all that smart though. You can spend your day pointlessly studying for the test or you could actually do something productive. If the teacher suddenly

threw a bunch of curveballs, you wouldn't be prepared. This is part of being intelligent.

People buy insurance policies to save them from catastrophes. That is the right use of insurance policies. If you can't afford to fail a particular test then the smart option is to prepare for it excessively. That's your insurance policy.

It is foolish to invest in insurance policies designed for problems you can manage. Insurance policies are designed to help someone else more than it helps you. That's what makes the insurance industry possible. If you're preparing excessively for every test then you're throwing your investment away.

This book is not about making it so you never study again. Sure... it's an option but it's more about never HAVING to study again. Studying shouldn't be a requirement when you're doing well in every other aspect of your class. Most students can do well in every other aspect of their class without studying. Studying is just a potential bonus area for you.

Playing it safe is not synonymous with playing it smart.

Making the decisions to reduce your study time dramatically can have an amazing effect on your life and coursework. It can improve your grades if you're not already around your peak. More importantly, it can

make school significantly more enjoyable.

This will change the way you look at everything related to class. Once you get these strategies in motion you'll notice the things that used to challenge you aren't so bad. Some of the stuff ends up being explicitly easy.

The problem isn't the material. It's usually the way people approach the material. When you change your approach, your perspective changes.

Eventually, you might even find yourself seeking out classroom challenges.

When I was in high school, I hated every second of school. I won't dig too much into the details but I wasn't happy with any aspect of it. I had mediocre grades through most of it. When I finally started to change my strategies and perspectives, everything got better.

In college, I ended up taking double course loads and enjoying the process. Since college I've still been exposing myself to more and more material to learn. Learning is something that I'm going to end up focusing on for the rest of my life and I'm going to love every second of it.

That's what I suggest your goal should be in this process. If you can make one thing happen, make it a

change on your perspective of education. Fall in love with education. You don't have to love school. You can use these strategies to still dominate through it but what will get you farther than anything in this book is the realization that learning decides the future.

What you learn will decide your future. When you share what you learn, it will decide other people's future. This is how you can change the world's future.

Love to learn and it will love you back.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this book.

If you enjoyed it then please leave a review to help other readers find this book.

You can learn more about my other ebooks at and gain more insights into how to improve your grades at www.SmartStudentSecrets.com

I'm always interested in talking to readers and answering any questions they might have.